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1833





James Law

LETTERS

TO AN

ANXIOUS INQUIRER,

DESIGNED TO RELIEVE THE

DIFFICULTIES OF A FRIEND

UNDER

SERIOUS IMPRESSIONS.

how as

BY T. CARLTON HENRY, D.D.

Late Pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church, Charleston, S. C.

WITH

AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY,

(In which is presented Dr. Henry's Preface to his Letters, and his Life by a Friend.)

BY G. T. BEDELL, D.D.

Rector of St. Andrew's Church, Philadelphia.

PHILADELPHIA:

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INTRODUCTORY ESSAY.

THERE are few among ministerial anxieties more intense, than those which relate to the proper course to be pursued towards persons, in an inquiring state as to the interests of their immortal souls. To one in the ministry of the everlasting Gospel, whose heart is right in the sight of God, there is no difficulty in placing out before the people the great plan of salvation, and in giving the right proportion of doctrinal statement and practical application. But when, as a blessing upon the word preached, God in his mercy to minister and people, sees fit to pour out his spirit, and bring men to ask in deep anxiety of soul, "What shall we do to be saved?"—it is then, that the real difficulties and the painful anxieties of the ministry commences. It is easy in private conversation with an inquirer, to explain with the most perfect clearness the terms of the

Gospel—to state the necessity of repentance—to tell him what repentance is—to urge the necessity of faith, and to explain its character. But these are the generalities of the Gospel which must be urged indiscriminately upon all, let the difference be ever so great in the intellectual or moral character of the individual inquirers. The grand difficulty exists, in the nice adjustment of the general requirements of the Gospel to the shades of individual character. And it is here, judging by our own experience, and the experience of many with whom we have conversed, that the difficulty principally lies. The inquirer will ask, how am I to know that the feelings which now rise up in my bosom, correspond with what the Gospel means by repentance? How am I to ascertain whether the emotion which now engages me towards the Lord Jesus Christ, is *faith*? How am I to tell whether the new set of affections with which I seem to be animated, do in reality constitute that *change of heart*, without which no man can see the kingdom of God? I am agitated alternately with hopes and fears—to deceive myself is ruinous—I know not how to go on, to recede I dare not—I come to have all my perplexities resolved. This at once is almost like throwing the weight of a human being's eternity upon the counsel which shall be given. Improper encouragement may make an individual

a mere *formalist* for life, and he may therefore, die deceived. If the feelings are repressed, and the individual left in doubts and hesitation, the inquiry may be abandoned, and he may fall into a state of entire neglect or apostacy. In this situation the temperament and moral habits should be understood, in order that the truth may be applied with the best success; and yet, during the urgency of an inquiring state, how is this knowledge to be acquired? Besides this, in a season of religious excitement, well understood under the title of a *revival of religion*, it most generally happens, that full conversations with all who seek instruction can not be expected. It is under these circumstances, that some experimental treatise which shall assist the minister himself, or which may be put into the hands of inquirers, becomes truly desirable, and will be hailed as a valuable auxiliary to the ministerial work. Just such a book we apprehend the letters of Dr. Henry constitute; indeed, it is one which leaves very little yet to be desired. It is true, that there are works intended for religious inquirers which, by long possession of the public confidence have, as it were, already occupied this ground, and our remarks on the value of Dr. Henry's letters, may seem to detract from the merits of these previous efforts. This, however, is not intended. Edwards on the Religious Affections, though

unequalled in some respects, is yet entirely too intellectual for readers whose minds are in a highly excited state of religious anxiety. The individual whose heart has settled down in its acceptance of the offers of the Gospel, and who does not want his anxieties relieved, but his affections animated and increased; and who, therefore, has time to look into the depths of Edwards' investigations, may take up his book with incalculable profit. But religious inquirers in their early state of mental anxiety, want instructions which shall be adapted by plainness and simplicity, to the immediate urgency of their situation. What the work of Edwards on the Religious Affections may want, will probably be supposed by some to be abundantly made up by one of the most celebrated, and most useful treatises in the English language. We mean, "Doddridge's Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul." It is almost impossible to speak too highly of this work, the only one well known and universally received as standing at the head of the class to which it belongs. There is no merely human work which has been made, by the grace of God, more instrumental in the salvation of sinners, and no man can with a clear conscience, or with a respect for his own character, detract from its reputation. It will probably outlive any work which ever has, or ever will be writ-

ten on this subject, because it has a hold upon the public mind, which nothing but its intrinsic merit could gain, and because it has by translations into very many languages, taken a start, which would render it impossible for any other to outstrip or even to reach it. After these remarks, which are meant to express the high veneration which we have for the "Rise and Progress," we shall be excused for a few observations which may modestly express our views as to some deficiencies which characterize that celebrated work. In investigating the subject of conversion, one thing has been very much neglected, viz. the necessity of taking into account the actual difference which exists among individuals, as to their peculiarities of temperament, their habits, views, feelings, opinions, and education. It is beyond all question, that these must modify religious experience; and yet persons in an anxious state of mind are most generally treated as if conversion was a process, which begun and went on and concluded in a certain uniform manner. Now this is contrary to philosophy and experience. In the process of conversion there are no two persons operated upon exactly alike, and it is for this reason, that religious biography is so little useful to anxious inquirers. The life may describe an experience, but it may have shades so opposite to that of the reader, that he conceives himself entirely out of the way. The

Rise and Progress of Doddridge has about it a similar difficulty, excellent as it is. "He marks out a single course, a single train of exercises, leading to certain results with little variation." It is on this precise account, that Doddridge's Rise and Progress, valuable as it is, is apt to disappoint the expectation of inquirers. We have met with very many persons into whose hands we have placed this treatise, and they have returned to us with the complaint, that its details did not correspond with the exact condition of their feelings. Under these circumstances several have been discouraged, instead of being relieved, because finding no correspondence, or very little, in their course with that marked out by Doddridge, they drew the conclusion that their experience, whatever it was, did not assume the character of real conviction of sin, or did not amount to genuine conversion. And we have found some whose minds have been relieved from their perplexities by a careful perusal of the "Sermons on Regeneration," by the same author, because these, though not so *generally* useful as the "Rise and Progress," have yet less of the evil of which we have here complained.

It was during a season of religious awakening, when the defects connected with the work of Doddridge, became more apparent, that the Letters of Dr. Henry fell into our hands, and was read with peculiar satisfaction, and

placed in the hands of others with the most manifestly beneficial consequences. It is possible that this may have some influence with us in estimating the work as highly as we do, and which might not appear to others under circumstances less exciting, so valuable as we have ventured to pronounce it. But this occurred at least five years ago, and more deliberate examination has increased, rather than diminished our favourable opinion. And we are happy to find that there are others, of no mean reputation in our country, whose opinions coincide with our own. In a review of Dr. Henry's work which we find in the *Christian Spectator* for Nov. 1828, there is the following high testimony. "He," Dr. H. "seems to have experienced some of the difficulties which he describes, and solves. He had been much employed as a spiritual guide to awakened and distressed sinners, and to doubting christians, and it is matter of devout gratitude that the great head of the church, directed such a man to put the result of his own thoughts and observations upon paper. From the impressions which we had received of Dr. Henry's character, of his strength of intellect, his delicacy of feeling, his christian simplicity, and the warmth of his piety, we were prepared to expect much from his pen: but his letters have exceeded our expectations. We consider him to have entered a field not hitherto suffi-

ciently explored, to have laid open entanglements and cleared away obstacles which have often retarded those who would escape from the city of destruction to Immanuel's land, and to have erected clearer way-marks at the opening of some of those devious paths which have conducted bewildered seekers to the gates of despair. We trust that these letters will be blessed by the Spirit of Grace, not only as the means of consolation and strength, but as the instrument of saving many from ruin. Dr. H. though dead, will long speak to the conscience and the heart of the trembling sinner." This is high praise, but we regret to say, that the last remark of the reviewer, has hitherto been frustrated by the fact that the work of Dr. H. has been published in too expensive a form to be available to the class of readers, whose cases it more particularly contemplates, for as "not many noble" so, "not many *rich*, are called" into the condition of inquirers. It is only at this date, more than six years after the publication of the first edition of the work, that permission has been obtained to present the public with a second, in a style which shall insure readers, by its cheapness as well as merit, and now we confidently look for the reality of the anticipation stated in the close of foregoing extract.

As the object of an introductory essay differs somewhat in details from a review, we

shall neither analyze the work, nor present extracts. Our desire is to fix attention upon the book itself. The reader will gather a more correct view of the treatise, by an attentive perusal of the introductory remarks of Dr. Henry himself, which we here present.

“While the religious public,” says the author, “have been well provided with Doctrinal and Practical works, and furnished with many valuable expositions of the Word of God; and while the divine system of Christianity itself has been ably defended against the cavils of its assailants, it is a matter of surprise to many, that a most interesting department of sacred literature has been either entirely neglected, or occupied by remarks of so general a nature as to answer very imperfectly the end for which they were designed. I refer to that department of instruction which is suited to the *particular exigencies of a Religious Inquirer, or an awakened sinner*.

“There is certainly no state of mind which involves more interest in its issue, or presents a more imperative claim on our sympathies, or brings more effectually into exercise our hopes and our fears, than that of the man who has been partially aroused from the slumber of spiritual death, and looks around him with an agitated feeling, to ask—“*what shall I do to be saved?*”

“To excite the conscience to at least a momentary activity, is very often far more easy than to meet that class of perplexities and cares to

which such an excitement may lead. And hence we see many who find it no hard task to point the penalty of the law to the heart of the sinner, and to bring in array before him the terrors of an offended God; and yet whose whole instructions to one in this interesting state, are so vague, and so ill-defined, as to shed no light upon his path, and to give him no clear conceptions of his real condition.

“Two things strike an observer of the awakened sinner, and call for all the prudence and caution with which advice or counsel may be given: These are—his *difficulties* and his *dangers*.

“Among the difficulties of which he is ready to complain, is that of the want of something suitable to his own peculiar state. We follow Apostolical example when we recommend him to “believe and repent.” But he is not unapt to tell us that he requires a more explicit direction than this. We commend him to prayer and the Word of God. But even the effort to regard this injunction, he informs us, furnishes new cares, and exhibits new obstacles in his way. His necessities multiply, and his demands increase.

“Now it would be easy to charge much of the evil upon himself, and prove to him from the economy of grace, and the character of his God, that all the fault lies within his own heart; and this is a melancholy truth of which we should not permit him to lose sight. But he returns all this to ask the particular character of the default, its causes, and the means of its removal.

“If we put into his hands any of the valuable little treatises which were designed to alarm

the unconverted sinner, he may assent to the truths they contain; but while his convictions are deepened, his personal difficulties are still not reached. There is much, very much, which remains unexplained; and which, while it lasts, multiplies itself: or extends through new ramifications, and creates new embarrassments. And his demand is more importunate than ever, for some instruction adapted to that idiosyncrasy of character, which he conceives to distinguish his present condition. Here is an eagerness of appetite which disposes him to seize, with avidity, on all that bears a remote resemblance to the fancied object of his wants. And it is to meet this, that any counsel we may give, should enter as far as possible into the familiarities of the heart. And yet to do so, important as it is, requires some further knowledge of the case than we may be able to obtain.

“Where the inquirer is disposed to present the exact state of his mind; and where he is able to define his feelings, the plain good sense of a private Christian may enable him to say all that is necessary. But the inquirer is not always willing to do the former; and he is very often incompetent to accomplish the latter. And yet indisposed, or unable, as he may be to do either, his solicitude is not the less to learn the grand secret of the causes and remedy of his moral disorder.

“Now if we were unable to meet this whole question, there is one thing which it is not out of our power to do—I mean that of furnishing to the sight of the sufferer, cases analogous to his own; or cases which may possibly strike him as similar.

“Even where we are at a loss to account, in all respects, for the existence of a particular experience, we do much for the inquirer by describing it. We prevent painful conclusions, which he is very apt to deduce from a supposed singularity; and we enabled him to draw inferences for himself, which may preserve him from the extreme of presumption or despair. We abstract his attention from extraneous cares, and fix it on some thing which may give a clue to the windings of his heart. The sooner we can effect this desirable end, the greater probability is there of a favourable issue. And the longer he is detained from it, the greater is his hazard of fatal self-deception; or of an equally fatal relinquishment of the interests of his soul.

“But the *dangers* to which the inquirer is exposed, may often be commensurate with his difficulties. And among these, not the least may be found in the well-meant, but injudicious advice of pious friends. A work, then, which will furnish Scriptural directions for different states of mind, consequent on the natural disposition, or temporal circumstances, of the awakened sinner, is certainly a *desideratum*.

“Or, if there be no hazard of a fictitious peace, from such a source, it may be the lot of the inquirer to be out of the reach of those to whom he might impart his anxieties, and from whose experimental knowledge, relief might be obtained. And in such a dilemma it is easy to foresee that all solicitude may be abandoned in hopelessness; recourse may be had to error; or postponement, to a more favourable issue, may ensue.

“In the private musings, too, of one in such a state, there may be imminent danger. Not only from his false expectations, but from the excuses which he secretly gives to his conscience. Present disappointment induces him to look somewhere else. And thousands in a land of Gospel light have given up all effort under secret pleas, as dishonourable to God as they are destructive to themselves. To enumerate these pleas, and to exhibit their criminality, might be an important engagement for one who acts as counsellor; but it belongs to a field by far too large to be occupied in every instance of application for advice; while the particular parts in which the inquirer is privately wandering, may not be discerned. A volume, then, which would answer this end might assist the adviser, while it rendered the folly and inconsistency of the awakened sinner distinctly visible to his own sight.

“If it be asked, whether I give the following pages to the public, with a full confidence in their adaptation to remove all these difficulties, and to obviate all these dangers, I answer—No. Well informed readers, and perhaps some who are not so, will observe defects which have not escaped my own eye; and possibly many which have not occurred to me in a hasty review. But although my expectations of complete success in this effort, are not sanguine, they are sufficient to warrant the trust that it has not entirely failed.

“I am persuaded that there are few inquirers who will not find something to meet at least part of their difficulties; and if the details which are given are considered too numerous and too

particular by others, *they* will be the last to complain of them. Or if the nature of this work seemed to require some little repetition, it will be a small objection to one whose mind is eagerly intent on learning all that relates to his spiritual condition; and who must see that the same perplexity or care, sometimes arises from different causes.

“Part of the subjects which are discussed in this volume, are not thoroughly canvassed. Nor is it necessary that they should be. Designed as the work was for a certain class only, it could hardly be expected that all in which the Christian is interested should be examined. And yet I would humbly hope that even the child of God may find something in the pages before him of interest to his own soul.

“As there are many who once belonged to the former of these classes, and who are now numbered with neither—who have returned to the world after hours of anxiety for their salvation; to such the recalled feelings of former days, and the reviewed excuses of a melancholy apostacy, may not be without some practical benefit.

“It may be that the examples given will be considered too numerous. But I have thought that they might be an advantageous medium through which some ideas would more distinctly appear. There is not one of them fictitious; and, excepting where marked by express quotation to the contrary, they have fallen under my personal observation. And it is of small importance that the language put into the mouths of such examples, was not exactly their own. This could not be recollect-

ed. But a faithful adherence to the substance and spirit of utterings by them, has been inviolably preserved.

“I have availed myself of any advantage which I could obtain, as far as I knew, from the works of other authors. And where it has appeared necessary to do so, I have named them. But they have been few. I have attempted to draw for materials rather on the Word of God, and on life as I have seen it, than on the writings of others.

“One more remark may appear necessary. The following Letters are exactly what they purport to be—written to a friend with a design to assist him in his inquiries for salvation. If it be thought that they may be of service to some under similar circumstances, I shall be gratified in the concurrence of the hopes of others with my own. If not, there is some consolation, under the failure, in the thought that they were written with a sincere desire to aid the cause of religion. They are sent into the world with few pretensions; but accompanied,—as they were in the act of writing them,—with prayer in their behalf, to the Great Head of the Church.”

It may perhaps be expected that we should present some view of the life and character of Dr. HENRY. We have no means of doing this, inasmuch as we had not the happiness of a personal acquaintance with him. Still the public will have less to regret on this subject, as there is a Memoir attached to the first edition of the work, from the hand of an intimate acquaint-

ance and friend—a Memoir which can not fail to be read with interest and pleasure. It is here offered verbatim as it originally appeared.

“THOMAS CHARLTON HENRY was born September 22, 1790, in the City of Philadelphia. He was the eldest son of ALEXANDER HENRY, Esq. the benevolent and venerated President of the American Sunday School Union. Originally intended for enlarged mercantile pursuits, the subject of this account went through an unusually extended course of literature, and took his first degree with distinguished reputation at Middlebury College, Vermont, in August, 1814. Immediately upon his graduation, the most tempting and splendid prospects of affluence and distinction invited his entrance upon a secular career; but having felt the power of renewing grace, and having devoted himself to the Saviour, while at the College, he “conferred not with flesh and blood,” but unhesitatingly embraced the laborious and self-denying profession of the Christian Ministry. Accordingly, he entered upon a course of Theology in the Seminary at Princeton, N. J. which was finished in 1816, and he received license to preach the Gospel. On his first entrance into the Ministry, his rare endowments and polished eloquence attracted uncommon attention, and opened before him several very important and inviting fields of labour. Having received, and ultimately declined, invitations to the pastoral care of churches in Wilmington, Delaware; Salem, Mass. and Lexington, Ken., he finally accepted

the unanimous call of the Presbyterian Church in Columbia, S. C., where he was ordained and installed, by the Presbytery of Harmony, in November, 1818. Upon the sacred duties of a Pastor, Mr. HENRY entered with a deep and solemn impression of responsibility, and an unwavering determination to pursue a course of untiring labour and unyielding fidelity. Taking a decided ground in defence of vital experimental religion; urging the doctrines of the Cross upon the consciences of his hearers, with the demonstration of the Spirit and with power; carrying his great work of winning souls to Christ, to the frequent prayer-meeting, the domestic circle, and the individual exhortation:—the result was such as might have been anticipated. The church rejoiced in spiritual prosperity, many were convinced of guilt and danger, and yielded to the influence of renewing grace; while many others clustered round the standard of determined opposition. Conflicting necessarily with those whose views and feelings were in complete antagonism to his own, his course afforded another severe test of character. The temptation to temporize was strong. By softening the expressions of God's Word, by yielding a few points of duty, he might have enjoyed universal favour and applause. But he had not so learned Christ. Unappalled by menaces, unseduced by flattery, he nobly maintained his ground, and willingly submitted to the painful sacrifice of the kindness of former friends, in stern fidelity to his Master's cause.

“At the close of the 5th year of Mr. Henry's ministry in Columbia, he received an unani-

mous call from the 2d Presbyterian Church in the City of Charleston, which he accepted under the full belief that it was a station in which he could be more happy and useful than by continuing where he then was. In this important and respectable Congregation, he commenced his labours in January, 1824, and was installed by the Charleston Union Presbytery. Here, untrammelled by opposition, and surrounded by an united and affectionate people, he enjoyed a field of action, worthy of his commanding talents and holy enterprize. Seldom has there been presented a nobler model of pastoral activity and fidelity; and seldom has there been witnessed a more effectual accomplishment of the grand purposes of the Christian Ministry. In the stated services of the Pulpit, and the crowded Lecture Room; in the Bible Class and Sunday School, in every family of his charge, and in the privacy of individual inquiry, his full soul was poured forth in affectionate, earnest instruction, and ardent supplication. Nor was the harvest long delayed. In the first and second years of his brief ministry, considerable additions were made to the church; but in the third, a blessed effusion of the Holy Spirit was enjoyed, and a goodly company of his spiritual children was gathered to the communion of the faithful.

“The indefatigable labours and constant solicitude of Dr. HENRY, during this precious season, so far impaired his health as to render a period of relaxation indispensable. He therefore undertook a voyage to Europe, and embarked for Liverpool in April, 1826.

During the four or five months of his stay in

Europe, he travelled through the principal parts of Great Britain and Ireland, and visited the Continent. Several weeks were spent both in Paris and London. This tour was attended by many very interesting circumstances, and produced important results. His mind was intensely engaged. His heart and hands were constantly full. In accumulating valuable facts and observations, in closely observing national character, and in obtaining accurate and enlarged views of the present state of Religion, Literature and Science, in different nations, his diligence and success have been rarely equalled. Amid all these varied scenes, the great business of his life was not intermitted. Whether on the mighty deep, or on the rapid journey, or in the crowded city; he ceased not to plead the cause of his Redeemer, and to persuade men to be reconciled to God. In Paris, he became intimate in a circle of devoted Christians, some of very high rank, who were greatly delighted and edified by his sermons and conversation. In London, his whole soul was engaged in viewing the vast operations of Christian benevolence, and in intimate association with eminent evangelical Ministers, and the best religious society. Here he preached frequently; and in one of the large dissenting churches, he delivered several familiar evening lectures, which were attended by crowds, and afforded the highest satisfaction.

“The high estimation in which Dr. HENRY was held in Europe, is evinced, by the solicitations for correspondence he received from numerous distinguished Civilians as well as Clergymen, and by the many valuable presents

and memorials of kindness, which were pressed upon him both by individuals and communities. A considerable collection of books, which he had bespoken from a bookseller, was paid for by one of the London Churches, entirely without his previous knowledge. But the richest blessing of his tour was the testimony he received, that several of the attendants on his preaching, and of the companions of his travels, had been brought, through his instrumentality, to a saving experience of renewing grace.

“About the beginning of October he took a sorrowful leave of his English friends, and sailed for the United States. Arriving at Philadelphia, he paid a short visit to his venerable Father and numerous relatives, destined, alas! to prove a final one on earth, and early in December, was welcomed, with the greatest joy, by his affectionate congregation. With redoubled vigour and engagedness, he re-entered upon his labours among his beloved people, and upon the prosecution of his studies. The latter, indeed, had known no interruption. For in no part of life, probably, had the acquisition of knowledge been so rapid, or intellectual exertion so unremitting and successful, as during this season of relaxation. The effect produced upon Dr. HENRY’s mind, by surveying the splendid Theological establishments, the vast treasures of sacred literature, and the towering eminence of many of the scholars and divines of the Old World, was altogether beneficial and animating. Instead of being disheartened and sinking into despondence, by a comparison of our institutions in these respects

with those of Europe, as has been the case with others, he was stimulated to nobler efforts, and refreshed by higher hopes. The inspiring scenes, he had witnessed in the religious world, caused a more intense conviction of the moral grandeur and awful responsibility of the Gospel Ministry. The noble achievements of the learned champions in defence of the Gospel abroad, disclosed to his mind more distinctly than ever, the grand field of intellectual effort, and enkindled an inconceivable ardour, to do extensive and permanent good in the world. He felt that the standard of clerical learning and study was too low in this country; and fully imbibed the spirit of that holy man, whose maxim was—"attempt great things, and expect great things."

"While, therefore, he remitted nothing of his former attention to pastoral duty, he devoted himself, with extraordinary zeal and diligence, to laborious study and composition. He pressed forward, as under the constant impression, that he had much to do, which *must* be accomplished, and that his time was short. The following work, undertaken at the special request of an English gentleman who was his travelling companion for some time, was commenced soon after his return. And towards its completion, he could not have laboured more unremittingly, had he foreseen, that, before its publication, his opportunities of usefulness to his fellow men would be closed forever. "Blessed is that servant who is found so doing." The Messenger, which came from his Divine Master, to summon him away from all his labours, found him in the midst of most

active and useful engagements. But his work was done. It is the Lord's doing and marvelous in our eyes. It is the duty of wounded affection to bow down in silence before the inscrutable mystery of this dispensation.

“On the appearance of that fatal scourge of Charleston, the Yellow Fever, in August, Dr. HENRY could not be persuaded, that it was his duty to retire from the city, or intermit his usual pastoral visits or his course of study. Accordingly he continued to visit the sick and afflicted, and to fill his pulpit regularly, until the first of October, when, in the enjoyment of perfect health, he was suddenly seized with that dreadful malady, which, in four days, terminated his precious life, at the early age of 37, leaving a bereaved widow and three children to lament the loss of such a husband and father as few ever had to lose. The scenes of overwhelming distress, which attended and followed this agonizing event, cannot be adequately described. Suffice it to say, that amid the alarm and consternation occasioned by his fatal illness, he alone was calm and unappalled. While around him were wailings and lamentations, his expiring voice was employed in rejoicing and praise. And while a “horror of great darkness” fell upon others, at his sudden and premature departure; he viewed it with rapture, as the bright and cloudless dawning of immortal glory.

“Dr. HENRY was richly endowed with the gifts of nature. In person, noble and attractive—in manner, polished and affable. He possessed in an eminent degree, as to voice, look and action, the attributes of a finished ora-

tor. In classical and theological learning, he had few equals of his own age and country. To a critical knowledge of the ancient languages, he added a correct acquaintance with several modern ones. Especially with the originals of Holy Scripture, and the writings of the Fathers, he was quite familiar. In a word, he was an honour and ornament to his profession—an accomplished divine. His devoted zeal for the souls of men, and his pure evangelical sentiments, will be most affectionately disclosed by the present volume, and one or two other posthumous publications. His inestimable worth as a Pastor is best attested by the heart breaking, inconsolable grief of his bereaved congregation. But the crowning excellence of his character consisted in an entire self-consecration, with all his endowments and energies, to the blessed Redeemer, and a deep experience of the power of religion. Thus he was rendered a rich blessing in his life, and richly blessed in his death. And when every earthly hope was extinguished, a light from above irradiated the valley of death's shadow, and he could enter it saying, 'O death, where is thy sting, O grave, where is thy victory!' "

In drawing this Essay to a close, we can not express our own views of the excellence of the Letters of Dr. HENRY in language which conveys our opinion more clearly than in the few concluding observations of the review to which allusion has before been made. "We have perhaps never read a book, except the Bible, with whose sentiments we could more exactly

accord, and few which appear to us better calculated to be useful, than these letters. Dr. H—— appears to take a common sense view of every subject in his letters, and these views seem to have been formed from a practical acquaintance with the matters of which he treats. When these letters shall be known, they will be esteemed an important treasure, not only by anxious enquirers, but by those who have any concern in religious instruction; and will be regarded as a valuable closet companion to the practical Christian.”

G. T. B.

Philadelphia, May, 1833.

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LETTERS

TO AN

ANXIOUS INQUIRER.

LETTER I.

Feelings of privacy commonly accompanying serious impressions—The critical state of an awakened Sinner—An instance of abandoned convictions—Advice.

MY DEAR SIR,

How shall we account for that secrecy of feeling which you have found it so difficult to infringe, and which is so common to the experience of awakened sinners? That delicacy which guards the threshold of religion, and restricts the conversation of intimate friends to its exterior and general matters? Shall we attribute it to a greater degree of refinement, or to a nicer sense of decorum? But it is as prevalent among the ruder, as among the more polished classes of society. Shall we ascribe

it to an unwillingness to obtrude our griefs upon the sympathy of friends? This would be an apology in which fact would not sustain us; for he to whom we unbosom our sorrow, is supposed to take a deep and unaffected interest in our spiritual welfare. And, moreover, this privacy is discoverable in the very man, who, instead of comprehending the sentiment of a Christian poet, that

——“with the soul who ever felt the sting

“Of sorrow, sorrow is a *sacred* thing,”

would, at other times, drag you rudely through all the minutiae of his private woes. Nor is a want of confidence the cause of this restraint—for every other feeling may be imparted with freedom. Nor can it be wholly, if at all, owing to the confessed etiquette of irreligious society, which proscribes the subject of evangelical truth, much as a law of Athens prohibited the name of Death: Nor to that disgust which arises from a familiar and ill-timed use of scriptural terms: Nor to any thing else which could furnish an excuse, while it implies a compliment to our refinement, our taste, or understanding.

These questions and answers, if they serve no other purpose, may at least lead you to the

conclusion that you are not alone: numberless other voices utter the same complaint; and the subject, in its different shapes, has given rise to a thousand discussions; and has led to a variety of artificial rules of Christian conduct. Professors of religion who sincerely desire to promote the weal of their friends, have frequently proposed such queries as the following:—How shall I express my concern for one who is prepared at all times to interrupt me, by saying—“this is a private matter between God and myself;” and who feels that he has reason for offence in a rude invasion of his tranquillity? How shall I introduce the subject of religion in a circle where it may be received with symptoms of impatience, or with that listless silence which hints its dismissal? And after all that can be said, there is an art in the successful introduction of a religious topic, which is less easily attained than zeal—a happy *tact*, which even the profane often admire, but which requires qualities that long experience and fervent piety may not be able to confer.

But this delicacy of feeling—we will give it its current title, although it belongs to that class of things which have wrong names, and which are embraced in the forbidden practice

of calling evil good and good evil—this delicacy of feeling, which, while it forbids the obtrusion of religious views, lest they create offence, and shuts the lips of the awakened sinner, is not a rare ingredient in the characters of many who entertain a trust that they have been the subjects of saving grace. There are those who have sustained a long and tedious struggle in their hearts—who, possessing a faint hope that they have passed from death unto life, relinquish the ordinary pleasures of the world, and engage in all the duties which are fulfilled by a lukewarm professor of religion—except the duty of profession itself—and who, while they lead a cheerless life, seem not to consider that what they deem an apology for neglect, is the very sin which keeps them suspended between heaven and earth, unfit for the enjoyment of either.

And even after a public profession of faith has been made, evils are multiplied from the same cause: Not only when the Christian and the Worldling, in their ordinary interviews, consider the topic of religion forbidden ground to both, but in the discharge of many of those obligations which both reason and revelation enjoin. A valued friend once told me, that

one of the most painful trials he had ever known, was in founding the domestic altar. On other matters he could speak freely; and private devotion occupied a due proportion of his time. But the conflict in his bosom was long and severe before he could persuade himself to become "the minister to his family." And can it be doubted that thousands of the rising generation retire unblessed from the restraint of parental prayer? Or can it be doubted that this single neglect has checked the influence of many a parental example, which might have led the offspring to serious thought, if not to salvation?

There is another modification of this delicacy, which attaches suspicion to it in all its forms; social intimacy is often seriously injurious to that Christian fellowship on which the prosperity, if not the life, of personal piety depends. This may seem a singular position, and it would be so but for the very matter now before us. The truth is one of every day's observation, that husbands and wives often converse more freely on the experimental points of piety, with those who are comparatively strangers, than with each other. The bond which nature has formed between relatives,

and which time has riveted, appears too frequently loosened, when we find that incongruous reluctance to converse together on matters of piety; and when we have seen even children more ready to open their minds on this subject, to friends less nearly allied, than to the parent who has watched over them with prayerful solicitude. How is all this? Is there something defective in Christianity itself? or something that changes the nature of our mutual relations? Not at all. There may be different causes which produce different degrees of influence towards these effects, but still the mover of all this mischief is that most secret of agents—*pride*. There is no need of defining, no need of explaining the operation of this principle; and it is wholly useless to quarrel with terms. Let him who speaks of this *delicacy*, and continues to foster it, examine the first feelings to which it gives rise: let him compare these feelings together, and note well their selfishness; and see if it be possible to escape our conclusion. Yes, pride has its retired habits as well as modesty, its seemly aspect, and its very diffidence of manner. And it is hence, that among the children of God, the consciousness that their mutual infirmities

are known to each other, and the corresponding fear that they might generate a distrust of their sincerity, very often stand in the way of a fulfilment of that prophecy which the latter days shall complete—"then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another."

You have sometimes seen the mind which nature had rendered ingenuous and frank, drooping under cherished woes—bending beneath a weight it strove to conceal—mingling bitterness with domestic peace, and discontent with outward prosperity—until the hand that was about to set the spirit free from its tabernacle, laid bare to the sight the wounds that festered within; and the nearing terrors of a death-hour broke the spell of restraint—and for the first time, the sufferer could ask, "what shall I do to be saved?"

Or where the mind dared not brood over its disquietudes, and was equally unwilling to divulge them, how often have religious impressions which seemed nigh to some good hope, left place to a spurious peace, which continued unbroken through life!

"But there *are* moments,"—you say,—
"when you are not only anxious to hear all that can be said on this subject, but almost wil-

ling to inquire of those around you.” A more intense feeling of danger would certainly produce this effect. Even pride gives way in a season of peril. A greater passion usurps the seat of a lesser, when the two can not reign together. And you have, perhaps, witnessed in another, that hardly-repressed anxiety of manner, which solicited an inquiry into its cause—that distant hinting at a subject there was not quite boldness enough to introduce; and you saw, plainly, the cause of all this, through the miserable efforts to conceal it. But because that hint was not taken, and that exposed anxiety was not reached by a single question,—and the theme of religion was still kept back—the half awakened inquirer suppressed a murmur, at the disappointment, and, in the petulance of a mortified child, gave up the whole matter, with the self-consoling thought—“It is partly the fault of others, if I perish.” Here is pride acted out. And puerile as it may appear, it is a case of no uncommon occurrence. I am persuaded that if the inquirer will take pains to examine the ground he is treading, he will find a scriptural admonition meeting him at every step, and fitting the very disposition of mind which he then entertains.

And it were well if, in the outset, he pondered the meaning of the Saviour's admonition—an admonition which strikes at a latent, but dangerous principle of the heart—"whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me, and of my words, of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father, with the holy angels."

It imports nothing to the purpose to say, that we would be willing to endure any public dishonour for the sake of Jesus Christ. There is a kind of heroism in this, which has its attractions. And it is more than possible that the very man who would give his body to be burned, rather than abjure Christianity, may be kept back far from salvation, by the petty consideration of shame: While it is equally certain, that thousands who now retire from the blessings of the Gospel,—dreading the first disclosure of their feelings,—would be willing to enter, if they could, into a *confidential contract*, with the Redeemer.

How important it is, my dear friend, to begin aright in any undertaking! And no where is it as much so as in the great concerns of the soul. An error here will follow us on; and may effectually preclude all discovery of the

truth. There is an ingenuousness and candour, for which the present state of your mind is well prepared, and the exercise of which will always furnish some relief. I have often thought there was something touching in your remark on an interview with W.—“his appearance at that moment, was like that of the angel to Hagar, as she sat in the wilderness mourning over her dying hope.” And I do admit that at such a season as this, we have our personal preferences of those to whom we would present the burden of our minds. Where there is good sense and piety in the object of our choice, the interview may be blessed. And I see no necessary reason, as others profess to do, why such a choice should produce an undue leaning on human means: For we entertain, with little apprehension, our preferences in the ministrations of the Word: And we are certainly bound to adopt those measures which most directly reach our wants; as well as to seek those instructions, which most immediately meet the circumstances of our particular cases.

And yet, after all, it is rather a *principle* than a *practice*, to which I would direct your attention. Whether we express our difficulties

to another, or adopt only those more direct means which are prescribed in the Word of God, is of secondary importance in many cases, judicious as the former may be, in most instances. But it is of primary importance to know whether we are attempting to commence this great concern, with a subdued temper, or with fostered feelings of pride.

It is a question which has more than once occurred to me, when I have reflected on your inquiries, whether I shall congratulate my friend on his present state of mind, or how far I should sympathize with him in this new species of sorrow? But how could I do either, alone? This is a most critical era in his life. It may look forward to the enjoyment of Heaven; or it may produce an issue as positive on the side of despair. Let us pause together for one moment and examine the ground on which you are standing.

The prejudices which you once carefully guarded, and which seemed as a retreat when conscience approached too near—how they have dwindled away! The objections to evangelical truth, which possessed shape and magnitude, with the very appearance of solidity, have vanished as the light grew brighter around

you. Difficulties which you thought deserving of serious investigation; and petty objections, which furnished an excuse for indifference to the whole matter of salvation—have receded without awaiting your scrutiny. Whence all this? It was no mere deduction of reason. You have arrived at a conclusion more irresistible, and by a process more rapid, than that of argument. This is none other than the work of the Spirit, whatever its end may be. You are surrounded by a new and powerful exhibition of divine truth. You look far enough, perhaps, into the doctrines of the gospel, to see that they contain an energy, and a fullness of meaning, of which you thought little before. You discover more nearly, the worth of the Christian's hope. You feel, in some measure, as if awakening from a dream, to a sense of want and danger. How will you account for all this? "*It is God that worketh in you.*" You can look back with some surprise on the past; while you compare it with your present sense of conviction. The thoughtlessness of your associates darkens your prospect by the contrast it furnishes: and you are half disposed to say,

I see a hand *you* can not see:

I hear a voice *you* can not hear.

There are moments, too, when you feel isolated in the midst of the world; and all its joys, and its cares, are merged in the vast consideration of your eternal fate; and your sensations seem as the shadow of Eternity thrown over your soul.

Now, whatever the degree of your feelings, all this is an operation of divine power; and—let me add—an effort of divine grace. But still it presents only part of the scene in which an awakened soul is the active or passive object. There is much which that soul does not see; and much of which it may seldom think. Angels, who minister to heirs of salvation, rejoice in the conversion of the sinner. Are angels, then, listless spectators of a scene whose result may gladden Heaven? Hell never loses a victim without a malignant effort to retain it. And are these lost spirits idle in such an hour? Do not imagine that these are the mere suggestions of fancy. The value of an immortal soul is not too small to deserve this interest.

Nor is this all. There are two other considerations which attach importance to this state of mind, beyond that of any former period of life. The light which shines so clearly from the Law and the Gospel, not only aggravates

the guilt of every sin committed in it, but renders every hour's delay more criminal in the sight of God. This is an awful truth, however little it may have occupied our thoughts. The sins of other hours, their neglects and follies, are committed under less restraint, and with less compunctions of conscience. And sad as is the record they bear against us, they are comparatively small. But when the Spirit of God has flung his brightness around duty and sin, and rendered them both unequivocal in our sight—when we are feelingly sensible that we are arrested in a career of danger—even the unchecked sin of *thought* has a power to blind the understanding, and to sear the conscience, beyond the *act* of iniquity, on another occasion.

The other consideration is this: Every trifle in your circumstances is likely to produce some positive effect upon your condition as an Inquirer. At other times, the influence of little events may reach but a little way. But at this period, when the heart receives an impression from every thing that can reach it—when tendencies of good or evil supplant each other so easily—it is not impossible that the eternal

doom of the soul may be suspended by an apparently negative matter.

There are political moments when the fate of an empire hangs on a trifle, and the welfare of its millions is to be secured or lost. It is so, too, in the struggle of an awakened sinner; when hope may be won or abandoned, even without the interference of a ruling passion. Here, then, I can not omit saying, that there is no idea more erroneous than that which is sometimes held by the friends of one who has been aroused to a sense of danger, and led to some seriousness of thought: I mean the idea that all is now well; that the convicted is "in a good way:" as if piety had already commenced its reign in the bosom, or a credible assurance were given of its future influence.

And are all these things really so? Are you singled out from the rest of the world, and placed on a spot which is soon to witness a change of infinite magnitude, in your present and future being? Yes; and your own mind meets these realities as they approach. There are hours when you feel as if every thing depended upon an immediate decision: when the conflict is plainly perceptible within you. And you sometimes ask yourself, "what will the

end be?" You testify to the truth of all this. You are to yourself a witness of the doubts, fears, hopes, and painful suspense, which agitate the bosom of one whose heart is contending with the Spirit of God. Other events may be of little value, even if they completely change your temporal condition. But all that is transpiring in this period of your history, will possess a mighty influence, and may give an unalterable tone to your future character.

I admit that there is something fearful in the reflection, that so much may depend upon matters, which, at other times, produce a less alarming influence: or that there should be a critical period of life, in which our future destiny is likely to be fixed: or that a present unhappy decision may possibly be final. But it is not indispensably necessary to appeal to any special doctrine of Scripture, in order to substantiate this truth. Every one who is acquainted with the human mind under the convictions of conscience, must have noticed the increased insensibility which succeeds a fruitless struggle; and the loss of moral power, after a violation of serious resolves. But this insensibility, and this loss, increase in a melan-

choly ratio, in the once-awakened sinner, who returns to the world.

Nor is it an extraordinary case, when we find a man whose mind has been the field of this conflict, utterly unsusceptible of serious thought, under the most alarming providences: Or even passing into the extreme of bitter practical hostility, against all that is evangelical. And it is even possible for him, in the midst of all this, to review his steps, and to remember the very goal at which present help and hope were abandoned together.

Such an instance occurs to my thoughts this moment; and I shall do you no wrong if I frequently attempt to illustrate my remarks by examples taken from life. The one to which I now refer, was that of an acquaintance, in whom a disposition naturally volatile, and feelings always impetuous, rendered the struggle more visible and marked. His unrepressed anxiety, and his impassioned resolutions, were known to his friends around him, and they awakened a general solicitude in his favour. It was impossible to be indifferent to the spectacle. Hopes and fears occupied the hearts of a prayerful circle. Expectations were raised and baffled, again and again. There was something fright-

ful in the operations of his mind, and in the earnestness of his manner. It almost reminded us of what we should have fancied in the days of evil-possession. But, even from this, we gathered some encouragement, to hope that this change would be as marked as his convictions. The result appeared at last: And it might have been foretold by the workings of wavering thought, as if the light of divine truth, that had shone so full, was now dimly flickering. The world laid a less disputed claim to his affections than ever. The voice of prayer was hushed: And the concern of many gave way to indifference.

Let me digress for a moment to say—this is all we usually know of such a case. In sight of the world he would stand just where he was before. Pious friends would sigh and hope for the best hereafter. But, in the meanwhile, a work is going on in his own bosom, part of which he may not understand; while another part plainly communicates a secret ominous of the future: for there is ever something, in this condition of the once-awakened sinner, which tells a foreboding tale. That brief and thoughtless prayer, contrasted with the aroused energies, which so lately directed every petition

to the throne of grace—that satisfaction when it is over, betokening the reluctance of the offering, and contrasted, in its turn, with the cry into which the whole soul had once been infused, “*God have mercy on me a sinner!*”—that change of meaning and of character, which appears in the services of the sanctuary—that—what shall I call it?—that conscious and renewed deadness to all that is sacred or spiritual—that feeling of one’s own weight again, on returning to the world, until the world has taken part of the burden on itself—that half-desperate, half-hopeful self-communion with the soul—or that “dash of the die,” which indicates a spirit hazarding all, in almost conscious infatuation—no matter what the sensations or signs may be, there is an obvious sense of a dealing between God and himself, in the breast of the apostate Inquirer, on his first return to the world. And although he take his rank among those around him, only as one of the impenitent of the earth, he is not insensible, himself, that his past experience has rendered his situation peculiar, and that it is possible to call a testimony against him, whenever events may awaken his conscience from its slumbers.

In the instance now before me, I question

whether the light of conviction ever went out altogether. There was a witness within his own bosom which continued to prophecy, although it was clothed in sackcloth. But his cavils were frequent and many, whenever evangelical truth was named: and they were always tempered with that acrimony of expression, which displays the unsatisfied condition of the utterer; and which reminds us of the desperate state of a fallen combatant, who flings the dust at his antagonist, in the vexation of his spirit, before he bites it in the agonies of death.

The subject of these remarks would converse, with all the eagerness of one who held an interest in the prosperity of the kingdom of darkness,—on the uncharitableness of Christians, on the discrepancy of sects—or on the unhallowed example of professors of religion. How wide a field! And he seemed to have left behind him all his personal cares, whenever he traversed it. But why should I detail?—A voice arrested the caviller. It was not that which confounded Saul on his way to the Christians of Damascus. It was that of Death; death, too, at a juncture in his temporal affairs. This, however, was of least importance. The crisis of an eternal fate he considered as past. But what of that?—Survivors put the best con-

struction on the remorse of the deceased. Besides—there is a natural disposition to identify remorse and evangelical repentance. And there is something revolting to the minds of most of us, in scrutinizing evidences on the bed of suffering. We are prone to reflect on what Almighty power *can* do, in an hour of extremity; and we willingly take the possibility for a hope. Who, then, would not have looked for the best? It was what he called “these illusions,” which he endeavoured to dispel. “I have always believed,” said he, “that there was a horrible thought in dating the possible departure of the spirit of God from the soul. We shudder at the idea of desertion, without reflecting on its particulars. But it is tolerable while wrapt in the mystery of ignorance—ignorance of its manner, its cause, and its time. And yet, at this very hour, I can look back to the turning point of my hopes. I can remember my struggles under conviction. I can recall the weariness of effort—the distaste—the compunctions, which preceded the first bold act of worldliness; and which, in their departure, declared the issue decisive. In all the confusion of my thoughts here is an unchanging spot in the survey of the past.

There it remains—and no hand can blot it out. No—you are not to imagine my judgment impaired in such a review. I can deliberately retrace the seasons departed. My return to the world was not designated by an act which the common rules of morality would impeach. But it was by one, which, it is plain, put an end to the struggle. And I could not renew the conflict when I would willingly have done so. Conviction did not leave me. But it sat on my spirits like a lifeless weight, that instead of giving them activity, crushed them down. My judgment is as much convinced as ever. But it avails me nothing. The brightness of a holy law, and that of the world which I am approaching, only render my condition more awful, as the midnight lightning does that of the wrecked mariner, by showing him the impossibility of escape. I can see,—I can comprehend,—but I can lay hold of nothing. I can compel no play of that interest which the near approach of the Holy Spirit once created in my bosom.”

We will drop the curtain here—for, in less than an hour, the sufferer knew more of Eternity than you or I.

Now it is not necessary that exactly such an example be adduced, in support of our position.

It is still true, whatever the nature of the feelings under conviction, that to realize the near interest in salvation which once gave energy to desire and force to our resolution, will be far less easy, after the mind has been brought to a certain closeness to spiritual things, and has retreated from them again. And the degree of actual guilt, in the commission of sin, may have less to do with such an effect, than have a sense of warning gone by, and the consciousness of past divine interposition. There is an agency between the Sinner and his God. And however little the former may say on the subject, or however indistinct it may appear, in the bustle of his thoughts, he will not be insensible to it, nor will he ever wholly forget it, in the remainder of his life.

Adieu, my dear sir, for the present. Remember what eyes are upon you. Remember what interests are at stake. Recollect that all your anxiety is known to One who can afford you relief: and that every fluctuation of hope and fear is noted, with an earnest concern for your welfare. This single reflection carries with it both admonition and encouragement. Be much in prayer. Make the Word of God your principal study. Maintain a vigilant guard over your thoughts: and avoid every

engagement which might unnecessarily divert them from your present pursuit.

I am, truly, Yours, &c.



LETTER II.

Mistaken views—Danger of reliance on feeling—The duty of avoiding unnecessary association with the World—Counting the cost—On the opposition of others—A melancholy instance—Advice—An instance of the happy effects of Christian prudence—Discouragements from luke-warm Christians—The folly of relinquishing the subject in consequence of external difficulties—Encouragement.

THAT ardour and perhaps vehemence, of feeling, which exist in some Inquirers, frequently preclude all suggestions of the judgment or understanding. To such a one no obstacle in the matters of the world appears of magnitude: No temptation seems worthy of thought. He believes himself fortified against all the seductions of common life. The great end of salvation he conceives to engage, not only the emotions of his heart, but the faculties of his mind. Without a single fear from external impressions, he is ready to encounter any temptation: and thinks himself prepared to

oppose the feelings of his present anxiety to all that could be set in array against it. The allurements of time have disappeared. All that belongs to earth has assumed a character of insignificance.

But is such a state always one of safety? May there not be danger in this overweening confidence? There is, certainly, imminent danger. The same susceptibility of temperament that exposed his bosom to its present agitation, lays it open to insidious encroachments from a quarter whence he apprehends but little danger; and the strong holds of his security are, generally, his weakest and most vulnerable points.

Nor is this a matter of surprise when we recollect that there is no state of mind more deceptive, or more treacherous, than that which is produced by certain kinds of serious impressions. The recession of the world is not, as may be imagined, the effect of a love of holiness: and the disinclination to pleasures recently dear, does not arise from a positive taste for piety. There is no new principle planted in the heart; and the powerful feeling which is supposed to govern it, is without any rule of control, or any defined place of direction.

The scenes of a single hour may produce a rapid and perceptible return of the current.

Is there, then, any thing more unwise, or more hazardous, than a confident reliance on a condition so precarious, in the midst of temptations that present a strong appeal to the natural heart? And yet it is to this we are to attribute the failure of many an Inquirer, whose earnestness had inspired us with every hope of his success: but who, in mistaking an unorganized feeling for a substantial principle, was taken in the snare which presumption had placed in his way. And then his astonishment is, that a state of mind which he considered the dawn of religion, should have passed off so easily, and all that is unspiritual resumed its sway in his bosom again.

If the remarks which I communicated in my last letter, have increased your apprehensions from the circumstances under which Providence has placed you, I trust there will be no reason to regret that they were written. There is, indeed, much to excite a jealousy of ourselves. And it is well to discover its operation upon our conduct; when that operation is not carried to an exclusiveness of the very object we are labouring to reach. And yet such

an effect, my dear friend, is more than possible: We may exert our whole efforts to keep up a certain condition of feeling, without any direct or practical reference to its ultimate design. The evil of this shall be the subject of a future page: At present, I have only to express my hope, that, while you entertain such serious fears lest your anxiety be diminished, and while you retain "this unaccountable timidity," on the subject, you may be enabled at once to cast yourself upon him who will understand all your infirmities, and who beholds not without much concern, a single one of his Creatures "in the gall of bitterness."

That you should *abandon all unnecessary intimacies which are unfavourable to your spiritual welfare*, is not only the dictate of imperative duty, but it is the prescription of ordinary policy. A judicious physician would always, if practicable, remove his patient from an infected district, and place him where the air is more favourable to his recovery. But the atmosphere of worldly associates is as inauspicious to spiritual life, as is the spot of infectious disease to the health of the human frame. The gaiety, or even indifference to religion, which prevails in the society of

worldly men, will not always give intensity, by the contrast it furnishes, to the convictions of the awakened sinner: Its more legitimate effect will be, that of unsettling all that gave promise of future good. He should remember that the tone of his mind, unformed as it is, subjects him to a more positive effect from the society in which he moves, than from other and more suspected causes: and that he requires every possible check upon dispositions which are now restrained by a rein that is weak at the best.

*“I am a companion of all them that fear thee,”** said one of old, in evidence of his delight in the counsels and commandments of God. Such, too, should be the language of the sincere Inquirer, when he enters up his resolutions to espouse the cause of the Redeemer as his own: a resolution which he is likely to make in the outset; and which he is to connect with the discharge of every sacred duty: For if there are certain duties which he supposes can be accomplished only by the Christian, he is persuaded there are others which it is in the power of the unrenewed man to complete. But the simple truth is—and it de-

* Psalm, cxix. 63.

serves our most serious consideration,—that he is under as much obligation as the Christian himself, to obey the whole law of his God; and his line of duty extends not one jot less far than that of the heir of grace: and all neglect or inability is charged upon himself; just as the temper and disposition which are opposed to holiness are condemned, as guilty, on the part of the sinner.

Yet whatever uneasiness a position presented in such a form, may create in your mind, it is conceded that a choice of associates is fully within your power; or, at least, that a retirement from an *unnecessary* intercourse with worldly men, is perfectly practicable. And it is equally certain that a disregard of precepts to this purpose, is in opposition to one of those petitions which should form a part of all our prayers—"lead us not into temptation." In the meanwhile, there is not a more deleterious effect observable on the mind of the man accustomed to devotional seasons, than that which he discovers when he comes to the chamber of retirement, reeking with the influence of worldly society. And it not unfrequently demands the full influence of a living principle of piety to restore him to a devotional frame. If such

be the experience of one whose principles and habits are confirmed, how much more important is the choice of society to the Inquirer.

Much has been said on the trials which decision on this subject are supposed to produce; and in some instances, with great reason. But may it not be true that, in most cases, no small share of these evils is imaginary; and a considerable part of the difficulties of our own formation? I assure you I have often thought so. There are few in a land lighted by the Gospel, who have not had their serious moments—not to say seasons of painful conviction—and whose judgments do not secretly approve the course of the returning sinner. Even he who professes to be satisfied with a cold system of morality, and who disavows a belief in the transforming influence of the Holy Spirit, is not always perfectly contented with the part he has adopted. There is, I have no doubt, a latent feeling of insecurity, brought into action by the separation of a former companion: and he may feel the reproach which that separation tacitly conveys: but whatever deportment he may manifest, depend upon it, there is no decline of true respect towards him. Apprehensions on this subject, therefore, are very fre-

quently groundless; and the unhappiness they create entirely gratuitous. And so, it might be added, are very many of the external cares which harass the awakened sinner.

That excuse for neglecting the concerns of the soul which so often follow the solemn admonitions of conscience, and which assumes such a shape as the following—“*I am afraid to begin the inquiry for salvation lest I be tempted to abandon it at last*”—is not without a partial operation here. There are those who are unwilling to forego society which they know to be prejudicial to their best interests, from a doubt of their future success in the inquiry, and a fear of the consequent shame on coming back to the world. And it is this which, while it produces a compromising spirit and conduct, effects the very failure they apprehend. Such a man is attempting to secure two irreconcilable interests; or at least, to retain one, in the peradventure of ill-success with the other. Here can be no sincerity of heart in the application for divine favour: no fair value set upon it—neither conviction of sin, nor a true disposition to surrender every thing unreservedly to God, and to relinquish all that stands in the way of such a sacrifice: A dispo-

sition of which you should never lose sight, and to which I would have your mind habitually directed.

There is not a more important scriptural direction to the Inquirer, than that which bids him "count the cost" of the pursuit in which he professes to engage. Any reserve, which he may desire to make, in the great obligations of duty, will as effectually bar his success as an avowed spirit of worldliness. And in this matter, with language that seemed designed to anticipate all such difficulties, the Saviour has expressly said, "If any man come to me, and hate not (a comparative term) his father and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea and his own life also, he can not be my disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his Cross, and come after me, can not be my disciple."* Here the dearest affections we are supposed to entertain, are considered secondary in the heart of sincerity. And the remainder of the chapter from which this passage is selected,—let me add,—deserves your attentive consideration. The awakened sinner has no right to form any calculations for the issue of his failure. Nor should he, for a single mo-

* Luke, xiv. 26, 27.

ment, count on the possibility of such a result: For if this be the termination of his anxiety, the event is of his own accomplishment, and not that of his God. He should be willing to withhold nothing; but to make a cordial and immediate surrender of all that he has, and is.

Let the Inquirer continue in the practice of worldly association, and the instance will be an exception to a general rule, if he do not ultimately abandon his object; if a certain, not to say a rapid, change, do not mark the transition of his feelings in a return to thoughtlessness again. The innocent cheerfulness, as he deems it, to which he is exposed, and which is here the levity of an inconsiderate mind, easily becomes an object of attraction: or the apparent amiableness of demeanour, which he beholds, inspires an unscriptural charity for those who exhibit it:—a charity, which, on comparing his conduct with theirs, he very naturally annexes to his own condition: And all this, especially when the unrenewed heart so easily grows weary of its burden of sorrow, and longs to deposit the load of its care on the first offered opportunity.

Let your companions, I pray you, be those whose conversation, and whose aims are spirit-

ual. Or, if this be impracticable, confine yourself as much as possible to the society of Him whose eye you can not escape, and who may be equally your Friend, your Counsellor, and your God.

It is indeed a melancholy truth, that, in the concerns of the soul, a man's enemies may sometimes be "those of his own household;" or, of the very group with which he is daily and necessarily associated. And favoured indeed are they, whose family and friends are all of the household of Christ; and whose progress in holy attainments is forwarded by a pious intercourse! But such is not the lot of all. Strong, and sometimes effective, opposition is made to the advancement of others, less advantageously circumstanced. The air of seriousness is mistaken for an unwarrantable melancholy. The sedate deportment, and perhaps abstracted thoughtfulness, disturb the vivacity of the domestic circle; or even excite some alarm respecting the mind, or health, of the Inquirer. Parental anxiety, or that of attached friends, suggests a thousand unhappy surmises; and measures are taken to arrest an event which affection itself is apprehending. Among these, are those misconcep-

tions of doctrine, those mis-statements of the character of religion, and those appeals to a religion of nature, which the natural heart is always prepared to furnish; or those false ideas of the attributes of God, and that unscriptural advice, whose end is rather to hide than to heal "the leprosy of soul." No where is the worldling so willing to advise on a subject which he does not understand, himself—no where so willing to "daub with untempered mortar," as in the complaint of the corruptions of the heart. The convicted sinner, who has some fair insight into his own evil, detects the fallacy of this interference; and while he knows that his disorder is misunderstood by those who, without being sensible of it, are perishing with the same disease, he can exclaim with a sigh, like one in distress before, "miserable comforters are ye all?" But where the view of his condition is more imperfect, and the wound has never been deep, the end of this interference may be fatal to hope. Affection will inspire a strong confidence in those whom we love. A child is very apt to attach an equivocal character to the rules which a father may violate, rather than suspect the integrity of his parent. And this very principle, not unfre-

quently, gives an undue influence to the unscriptural and most injudicious counsel of friends; and that too, it may be, where the motive is not fully understood by themselves.

It is a cruel kindness which would sacrifice the interests of the soul to a temporary pleasure; or hazard them all for the sake of its own selfishness. And yet we have reason to apprehend that the scenes of another world will tell many a story of woe in the history of the soul, touching this very point.

“I was present,”—said a worthy minister of the Gospel, on an occasion which introduced this subject—“I was present where an instance of this kind made a painful and indelible impression on my memory: An accomplished and amiable young woman, in the town of ———, had been deeply affected by a sense of her danger. She was the only child of a fond and affectionate parent: And the deep depression which accompanied her discovery of guilt and depravity, awakened all the jealousies of the father. He dreaded the loss of all that sprightliness and vivacity, which constituted the happiness of the domestic circle. He was startled by the answers which his questions elicited; while he foresaw,—or thought he foresaw—a

fatal encroachment on a hitherto unbroken tranquillity. Efforts were made to remove the cause of disquietude: but they were such efforts as unsanctified wisdom directed. The Bible, at last—Oh how little may a parent know the far-reaching of the deed, when he snatches the Word of Life from the hand of a child!—the Bible, and other books of religion, were removed from her possession; and their place was supplied by works of fiction. An excursion of pleasure was proposed, and declined. An offer of gayer amusement shared the same fate. Promises, remonstrances, and threatenings followed. But it was the unhappiness of the father which completed the inducement to compliance—Alas, how little may a parent be aware that he is decking his offspring with the fillets of death, and leading to the sacrifice, like a follower of Moloch!—The end desired was accomplished. And all thoughts of piety, and all concern for the future, vanished together. Less than a year shifted the bright scenes of domestic peace. The fascinating and gay L—— M—— was prostrated by a fever that bade defiance to medical skill. The approach of death was unequivocal; and the countenance of every attendant fell, as if they had heard the

flight of his arrow. I see, even now, that look directed to the father, by the dying martyr of folly. The eye seemed glazing,—and it was dim in hopelessness; and yet there seemed a something in its expiring rays, that told reproof, and tenderness, and terror, in the same glance. And that voice—its tone was decided, but sepulchral still—“My father—last year I *would* have sought the Redeemer.—Fath—er—your child is”—Eternity heard the remainder of the sentence; for it was not uttered in Time. And the wretched survivor saw before him the fruit of a disorder, the seeds of which had been sown when his delighted look followed the steps of his idol in the maze of a dance. Oh how often, when I have witnessed the earthly wisdom of a parent banishing the thoughts of eternity, have I dwelt on that expression that seemed to arise from a season of departed hope—“last year I would have sought the Redeemer!”

But there are instances in which the opposition is of a more distinctive character; and when, instead of arising from an avowed regard for the temporal welfare of those concerned, it collects and concentrates the malignity of a heart inimical to grace. And this may be

observable in the very individuals who pay an outward respect to the ordinances of religion. And the taunting sneer, or the lower, but not less bitter, ribaldry, aims to transfix a spirit already fallen by another hand. For that very temper which applied to the Saviour epithets of ignominy and falsehood, and then condemned him under the charge, is not less disposed, at the present day, to apply false terms to all that opposes its interests, and then to hold up the object of its slander to contumely and reproach. And should the sincere follower of Christ hope to live ever unassailed, when his Master was accused as an Epicure, and executed as a Traitor?

There is one consideration here which should not be forgotten; it is this: If the thoughtless opposer were compelled to assign his true motive for active repugnance to the operations of truth, that opposition, instead of proving an impediment in the way of the Inquirer, would form a strong ground of encouragement. He would see its source in an ignorance alarming in the extreme—or in a selfishness which arrogates to itself a right to new-modify the Gospel-plan—or in the disguised malice of a heart that partakes of the rancour of the Lost. Be-

lieve me, this language is not too strong. The passions of a bosom unreconciled to God, are never displayed under more plausible pretexts, or with more decided energy, than when they are called into action by an example of piety, warning while it enlightens the conscience—or by an instance of departure from worldliness, forming a gap in the circle of association that may more admonish of danger, than the very instructions of the Sanctuary. Yes; if the Inquirer would ponder these truths, of which he may have the clearest conviction, every hand that would oppose his progress would appear to beckon him on.

Religion is indeed the only sure basis of domestic peace. But whenever it comes in contact with a spirit of worldliness, or threatens to encroach upon its territory, we are to predict nothing less than the fulfilment of the Redeemer's prophecy—“*For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.*”*

To an affectionate bosom, it must be admitted, there is a peculiar painfulness in a situ-

* Matthew, x: 35.

ation which involves a contest between natural attachment and Christian principles, or convictions of duty. And it is far more than possible that it has often thwarted the great purpose that appeared to have begun in the bosom. But to all this, my dear friend, may you be able to say,—“none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy.”* To you, a voice has come significant and earnest, as that to one in former days: “Escape for thy life; *look not behind thee*, neither stay thou in all the plain.”†

In some instances of severe opposition, the fault may be, in a considerable measure, in the Inquirer himself. His own conduct may provoke an array of hostility where it would not, otherwise, have appeared. Let me then subjoin the following injunctions :

Avoid all that unnecessary appearance of gloom, which may be mistaken for austerity, or may give rise to a suspicion of rooted melancholy. The effort to exhibit a hilarity which you do not feel, and which would be productive of mischief, in your present state of mind, even if unfelt, is certainly one extreme. But

* Acts, xx, 24.

† Gen. xix, 17.

a cultivated dejection of countenance, or air, is another, which may be injurious to yourself, as well as to others. And there are those who have been induced to form an artificial aspect of sorrow, by the hope that the artifice may sober and depress their own feelings. This is nothing less than a species of hypocrisy. On the other hand, sedateness and sobriety of deportment will be perfectly compatible with that amenity of demeanour, which Society has a right to claim from us all. You owe much to the happiness of others around you: Never, therefore, unnecessarily infringe it. But especially, you owe it to your God, to avoid subjecting his cause to an imputation which it does not deserve. It was an excellent answer—if understood within its proper limitations—which was given by a Minister of State,* to one who rallied him on his seriousness in the midst of the festivities of a Court: “While we laugh, my friends, all things are *serious* around us. *God* is serious, who exercises such patience towards us; *Christ* is serious, who shed his blood for us. The *Holy Ghost* is serious, who strives against the obstinacy of our hearts. The *Scriptures*

* Sir Francis Walsingham.

are serious, in all that they say. All that are in *Heaven* or *Hell* are serious. May *Man* then, trifle, whose doom is settling every moment?" And it was, perhaps, a still better reply given by one who had been reproached for his visible distress: "It is not *religion* that renders me sad, or that has ever rendered another sad; it is the want of religion which I mourn." A distinction which our worldly friends are not apt to remember.

Again: If ever it become necessary to defend the views you have adopted as your own, and to which despondency is so often imputed, do so *with all that gentleness of spirit, which may win others, while it is a safeguard to yourself*. One of the most lovely effects of Christian prudence which I have ever known, arose from the conduct of a young friend, whose temper was naturally irascible, and whose love of victory in argument was paramount in his bosom; and who under distress for the fate of his soul, displayed a manner affectionate and patient, in opposition to numerous efforts to harass and discourage him—"Why,"—said his brother, after an ill-timed charge on his principles—"Why are you not

now as desirous of victory as in former times?" In a subdued tone, he replied, "the cause was that of my own vanity: the present cause is Christ's: I was alone in the first: Omnipotence will take care of the second." It may have been manner—or, if you please, it was the contrast between past and present feeling, so visible here, that produced so powerful an effect. Certain it is, the aggressor, without being *repelled*, was disarmed. His weapons were melted down; and his heart was melted with them. The brothers soon sustained a nearer relation to each other, than ever, in the family of the Redeemer.

May we, my friend, always display less solicitude to fortify opinions of our own, however just they may be, than to extend the cause of Christ, by an example that shall be "a living epistle." If there be a power on earth, of all others most adapted to disarm opposition to the truth of God, it is such a one as I have just presented to your sight; and such an example is likely to be visible in ourselves in proportion as we study our own hearts, and look with intentness to the Cross.

There is, sometimes, a species of negative opposition—if I may so call it—of which the

Inquirer bitterly complains: I mean that of the apparent indifference of professors of religion to the state of his mind. Deepened anxiety may have supplanted any scruples of delicacy which had previously existed; and he may have expected that sympathy which sorrow frequently claims, and, in his disappointment, imagine an utter unconcern in his behalf. I have already referred to the possibility of such a disappointment. But let me now add, that even this is conducive to the benefit of the sincere penitent. If it lead him to exclaim, “no man cared for my soul!”—if it overwhelm him with a renewed feeling of hopelessness, it may, and it will, more effectually unite, and concentrate, the powers of his mind in “the Hope of Israel.” When it is remembered how nominal is the profession of many who “have a name to live;” and how even the zeal of the Christian may decline,—any such disappointment, painful as it is, can be no fair cause of discouragement. It is indeed melancholy to see that supineness so much at variance with an active love of the Redeemer, in those from whom we should not have expected it; and at a time when it operates with such a repulsive power. But this has no necessary connexion

with our own interests. A great matter is pending between God and our own souls; and nothing without should divert our attention a moment from it.

In concluding this Letter, I would observe that there is no inconsistency greater than that of relinquishing the pursuit of salvation, on account of any external circumstances which may be in the way. To suppose that we are ever at liberty to wait, until “a more convenient season” shall present fewer difficulties, is to imagine ourselves in an anomalous condition, in which we are at liberty to stand apart from the invitations of the Gospel—a condition in which enmity of heart to divine grace is legalized—the laws of God suspended, and their penalty withdrawn. It is the whole of this which is implied in the excuse which the sinner finds in the ordinary obstacles produced by his circumstances in life.

Never suffer yourself to pause for a single moment, to magnify obstacles that may be in your way. You can now form some affecting estimate of the value of the soul. Ask, then, of your own understanding—can He who bids you to his mercy, frame for you a yoke so oppressive that you are obliged to decline it,

even at the peril of the soul? Can He, whose holy Word gives assurance to the sincere Inquirer, that “as his days so shall his strength be”—can *He* speak an invitation, well knowing that there are difficulties too serious to be within the possibility of removal? Is he capable of such mockery to the wants of a fallen creature? Oh let us ever be careful that our suspicions do not impugn the majesty of Jehovah! Go freely to One who is able to take off the burden of your cares. Recollect that whatever difficulties appear in your way, he that divided the waters of old, can open a passage for you to the Heavenly Canaan. In every apprehension remember—“there hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful who will not suffer you to be tempted above that you are able; but will with temptation also make a way to escape, that you may be able to bear it.”

I am truly,

Yours, &c.

LETTER III.

Those difficulties which are of least importance most generally discouraging—Impatience arising from disappointed expectations—A complaint—Its causes—The dread of increasing anxiety—A false conclusion—Evils arising from natural buoyancy of feeling—Difficulty in the doctrine of Election—Inclination and despair aid each other—“I am seeking,” a false plea—“I am waiting for a day of power”—“I am waiting for God to do *his* part.”

MY DEAR SIR,

SUFFER me to add a few words more to some remarks in my last letter.

I will commence with a position which, to me, appears worthy of serious reflection; it is this—*the temptations to which the awakened sinner is exposed are inconsiderable and weak, in proportion to the sincerity and earnestness with which he sets out.* When his mind was entirely engrossed in worldliness, it seized with avidity on the most contemptible objections to evangelical truth: and the smallest of these might have been sufficient, at times, to satisfy an understanding vitiated by sensual habits and taste. But when the remonstrances of the Holy Spirit are brought to bear, in some measure, on the mind and the conscience, such objections disappear, and per-

plexities of a different character arise in their place. And the magnitude of these will depend on the same rule, whether they arise from the state of the Inquirer's mind, or from the agency of his spiritual adversary. He who never pays a higher price for the soul than his victim demands, and who met the venality of a Judas with thirty pieces of silver, because he asked no more, uses the same economy of means in the difficulties with which he would dishearten the sinner who has been led to a partial seriousness. Have you not remarked how fully this position is exemplified among Inquirers? Have you not observed that more abandon the pursuit of salvation in consequence of petty obstructions, than on account of those more imposing? And does it not prove that the true state of the difficulty is to be found in the affections or desires of the Inquirer? I am persuaded it is so; and that causes which discourage many, have little or no influence on others.

Let us examine some of those evils to which a failure is so often to be attributed. We will begin with one of the most common—*the impatience arising from disappointed expectations.*

We will suppose the Inquirer to be conversant with the general invitations of the Gospel; sensible that his natural condition is not one of safety, and determined to relinquish it. He begins a change in some of his habits; and commences the practice of prayer: attends with regularity on all the public means of grace: takes up some religious works: frequently consults the Bible; and devotes a set part of his time to serious thought. Days, and perhaps weeks, pass by; and as far as he can discover, he has not arrived a single step nearer his object: But if any conclusion be drawn, it is that he is further off than ever. How is all this? The simple truth is, he has engaged in a course for which he has no cordial inclination. His taste is repugnant to the task he has enjoined upon himself; and instead of being altered, as he had hoped, by his new employment, continues averse as ever. The novelty of experiment wearing off, every effort he makes increases the sensation of drudgery. There is no spring of action; no powerful motive; and nothing to give life to desire. The schemes which fancy had formed, and the prospects it had presented, like all other imaginary things, pass away: and he perpetually asks—"is this

the fruit of my labour?—I have done all that God has directed me to do; but I have done it in vain. I see none of the divine power I was taught to expect. It is useless to prosecute the attempt.”

How different is all this from his first anticipations! The short suspense, and then the peace in prayer—the comfort which was to flow on to his soul as he advanced—the pleasure of communion with God, after he had shed a few tears, deemed as honourable to himself as they were to be effectual to the end of his pardon—it was for these he was looking.

Oh there is as much that is visionary, in the conceptions of many, respecting this whole matter, as there is in the regions of romance; as much that is unreal and fictitious. And when the search for all this has failed, the sinner is disconcerted; a mortified feeling ensues: or a gradual and thoughtless relapse to matters more congenial; with an effective, but not painful, despair; and a settling down with the abandonment of all present expectations.

It is easy to decide that there has been no real anxiety here. But, then, what was the obstruction in the way of this Inquirer? Why did not a course which is most commonly pre-

scribed, as the ordinary means of grace, end more favourably? Why should all such pains and care be unavailing? I will tell you: This man overlooked the whole conditions of salvation. Neither faith nor repentance were presented to his mind. The track he was pursuing may indeed be called part of the ordinary means of grace: but he had no heart for the engagement in which he was occupied. It was altogether a work of mechanical effort. This is evident from the fact that he could have proceeded a very short distance, without becoming, in some measure, better acquainted with himself; or without discovering inducements to surrender himself at once to the Saviour. But to any knowledge which he might have obtained of his state, he paid no attention: On the contrary, he sedulously avoided a near approach to the truth. Let me illustrate this, by a review of the circumstances as they occurred: He saw distinctly that his heart was not right, if he saw no more: for the formality of his whole conduct must have made this plain. He was enabled, too, to discover that his conceptions of divine truth were gross; that he had no just sense of sin; that there was an awful distance between himself and a reconciled God; and that the

very feeling which occupied his bosom, on the failure of his hopes, betrayed a heart at variance with holiness.

If he saw no more, it was in his power to ascertain all this. But he acted on no part of it. He would have overleaped all that was intermediate between the first thought of religion and the evidences of a renewed soul. Evidences of another description—those of a latent depravity—he would not examine. With the same inattention, he saw his natural helplessness. His growing distaste of devotion when the novelty of his pursuit was past, and his sad heartlessness in it before, ought to have indicated more than they did, and to have taught him a practical lesson of infinite value. But if he learned, it was only to misapply. He still laboured for—he knew not what; while he gathered no new motives for earnestness, or for directing his investigation into his own heart. Where, then, was the fault? Did he not evade the conviction which might have brought him, as a penitent, to God? And while conscience sometimes accused him of this, did he not retreat from the accusation, and secretly hope that some *peculiar* way would be found out for him—some distinguishing favour bestowed,

—which selfishness is ever ready to promise even at the cost of the terms of the Gospel? Oh what hypocrisy of dealing may be seen flowing from the reasonings of a selfish heart! How much that lurks within him, he would conceal from his own sight! and how much are all his sacrifices, and the temper with which they are offered, like those of him who frowned on Heaven, because Heaven stood aloof from his self-complacent spirit!*

Let me repeat what I have already hinted, —and I may have reason to apply to other instances—that, in the case before us, the Inquirer has no defined object in view. He is led to serious thought, but it is to no distinct purpose. He is in the condition of one who hears a vague report of personal alarm, without being able to conjecture its meaning, or its nature; desiring to anticipate the evil, without knowing where to direct his energies. Yet even from *him*, this Inquirer differs in one unhappy respect: Such a man would examine all that could throw light on the truth: He would meet intelligence half-way. Not so here. There is a want of that candour to himself, which even the law of self-preservation should

* Gen. iv. 5.

suggest. And he continues brooding, with a half-affected sorrow, over an indefinite evil. And, perhaps, uttering secret murmurs to himself, which tend as much to harass his mind as to alienate his soul still more from his God. Has one in this situation a right to complain of his failure? Has he not stood back from the accomplishment of his own end? The adage of one who understood the heart is too easily verified—"the foolishness of man perverteth his way: and his heart fretteth against the Lord."*

But we will imagine such a one to have advanced further. We will suppose him to have seen enough to know that a more serious development awaits him: and that, if he continue his pursuit, he must encounter the spectacle of moral deformity which an unrenewed spirit always exhibits. He sees enough to create an alarm,—not on account of his danger, but on account of the pain which will accompany perseverance in his investigation. It is a *present* ill which he dreads. The terrors of Eternity are removed still further off, while he is engrossed with these apprehensions. If he go on, he must suffer:—and he has arrived at a point of reflection near enough to obtain some

* Prov. xix. 3.

general idea what that suffering would be; and to see that the path to Calvary may be one of distress; that the call which invites him to Christ is one which reminds him of wretchedness and guilt. And that the act of obeying it must be one of self-abasement. To proceed, then, is, as it were, in search of sorrow. "If"—says one in such a state—"if faith, and repentance would come of themselves,—or if conviction would bring, at once, that distress which would as immediately procure the favour of Christ, I should be satisfied to encounter it. But to go on making painful discoveries—becoming the executioner of my peace—it is requiring too much."

And what heart burnings ensue! And the secret thought is, "God *ought* to do more to help me!"

Now there are two reasons why this man gives up the important question before him: One of these, I have already said, is the *dread of present suffering*—the natural disposition to postpone a day of distress. He had been instructed to approach the Saviour directly; but no sooner had he seen a part of the path he was to have travelled, than he relinquished the design.

The second reason is found in a feeling common to this state of mind; and may be expressed in the following language—"I have certainly made some discovery into the state of my heart: I have arrived within a certain distance of my object: *I can reach this point again at pleasure.* It is some satisfaction to see what I *can* do. I am encouraged, therefore, to return to the world."

A third case may be found in that *buoyancy of feeling* which so easily rises, after a momentary depression, higher than ever: that temper, which, unless grief give it sobriety, it is difficult to arrest long enough to effect any important purpose. In such an instance, serious impressions come and go at the call of a trifle. But they come as the light cloud which flings a shadow over the gaieties of the heart: and the little circumstance of external temptation—joined, as it always is, to the reluctance of an unsanctified heart to the scheme of grace—removes them again. The remembrance of a favourite amusement—so unlike the present unwelcome sobriety—disheartens and discourages: and even the thought of a frivolous jest whets the appetite again for worldly amusements. This is a lamentable state, in which

the hopes of an immortal soul remain at the mercy of a petty incident. But the consideration of that very truth ought to furnish an inducement to more substantial resolutions, and to create a more effectual alarm of danger.

Unhappily, this is not always the effect. The mind of such a man easily deceives him. After having once abandoned the pursuit, he may return to it again with more earnestness: and with some additional hope from his former experience. And he may do so again, and again—for such a mind is the only one liable to frequent awakenings—but we may see him, in every instance, deciding against himself, with the plea of the utter impossibility of success. Yet is it not acquired habits of which he is complaining, or on which he charges all his difficulty?—habits, which, if they stand in the way of his spiritual welfare, are equally sinful and dangerous: And which are as certainly preparing their harvest of future remorse as those more positive and flagrant. It is indeed a hapless spectacle which the Inquirer here displays; when, like the idolatrous Jew, in whom the strength of habitual sin was too great for his convictions, he exclaims,—“there is no hope; no; I have loved idols, and after them *will* I

go!" But, if he took pains to examine the feelings with which this plaint is uttered, his conclusion would be more unhappy than he now suffers it to be. Let us look at it, in passing,—for its frequency, in one form or other, renders it worthy of notice.

There are two principles here which afford each other mutual strength—*Inclination* and *Despair*: Inclination to return to the world brings a plea from despair of success in the inquiry; and this despair of success encourages the inclination. It is the apology for vice which we may hear every day. "My habits," says the drunkard, "are too strong to be broken." "My passions," says the sensualist, "are too powerful to be withstood." "My love of frivolity," says another, "is too firmly fixed to be shaken." I know there may be a sadness of heart with which such an apology is uttered: But then it is counterbalanced by a secret pleasure in returning to more congenial engagements, in which it is soon lost or forgotten.

Now, I would appeal to such a one, whether this be not the sensation with which he abandons his inquiry for salvation? And while he would find little reason to hesitate in reply, he

might see a powerful motive to awaken him to a more permanent sense of danger, in a consciousness that it is *a love of sin* which holds him back from the Gospel. It is ignorance of this truth,—or indifference to it, which suffers him to pass so easily again to listlessness and folly.

There is another difficulty, which deserves some consideration; not only because it is a misrepresentation of an important doctrine, but because it affords what is considered a plausible pretext, in the sight of many: I mean a difficulty originating in a *misconstruction of the doctrine of Election*. This is not only a stumbling block in the way of the Inquirer, but it is an excuse of frequency in the mouths of the careless. The complaints of the two are substantially the same, although they may differ in form. The latter is expressed somewhat as follows:—"If I am elected, I shall be saved; if not, it is useless to apply for salvation." The former affirms that an effort has been made; and an unfavourable conclusion is drawn from its failure. "I *have* tried; but in vain. I see I am not elected, and therefore I dismiss the subject."

Is it not strange that men who, in other con-

cerns, are not deficient in good sense, should make the secret counsels of God a rule of action? That they should profess to be governed by a law of which they are confessedly ignorant? That they should discard, in their spiritual affairs, the simple process of reasoning which they adopt in the common things of life? Or shall we account for all this, by affirming that the careless neither mean nor believe what they say? And that the Inquirer intends only to avow the weariness of his pursuit? We have great reason to believe this. And if it be indeed so, what wickedness does not this trifling evince! What horrible impiety in uttering a known falsehood under circumstances rendered solemn by the loud calls of the Holy Spirit!

To either objector, the following questions and remarks may be worthy of some thought:

It must be admitted that you are left to the choice of holiness or sin: you are at liberty, so far as your free agency is concerned, to adopt a worldly or spiritual line of conduct. Experience and Scripture coincide in this position. The freedom of the will is not a matter in dispute. But if your difficulties on the subject of predestination were consistent with each other,

you would reason thus:—"I am fore-ordained to the commission of good or evil; I know not which; but until I can ascertain this, I will make no choice of either." And the consequence would be, at least an honest effort to avoid iniquity. Now no such reasoning, or effort, ensues. You continue in the way of the transgressor. And, in doing so, you are deliberately fixing your own destiny. Is your complaint, then, any thing less than a cover of hypocrisy—a cloak thrown over the desires of a depraved and treacherous heart?

Again: you can not find any decree which forbids your acting righteously, or that can extinguish a desire of salvation in your bosom. What, then, has this doctrine to do in the question before you? All the invitations of the Gospel are distinct from it; they are never given with a design that we should pry into the secret counsels of God, in order to discover their application to us; and those counsels can never contradict them.

Take the following case: A Ruler offers pardon to certain rebellious subjects, on condition that they lay down their arms. Some of them comply, and are pardoned. One refuses, and his reason is—"I am not among the number

whom the Sovereign designed to save, and it is therefore useless to accept the terms of forgiveness." Now would you not say of this man, that he falsifies the assertions of the gracious Ruler; and multiplies his own guilt? But the offers of our Divine Sovereign are not less explicit; and the conduct of the rejecting sinner is not less flagrant.

Why do you conclude with such certainty, that you are not among the elect? Has any one revealed this awful truth?—if not, your conclusion has no higher origin than *conjecture*. And what is this but a criminal intermeddling, or a fanciful trifling with things belonging only to God? If such a conjecture detains you from the love of Jesus Christ, is it not criminal? Are you not destroying your own soul with weapons of your own fabrication?

The Holy Scriptures, as well as the economy of the divine government, abundantly prove that non-election can never be the ground of condemnation. God will judge us by our own works, and not by his secret decrees. The doom of the lost will be, because they "love darkness rather than light"—because they prefer iniquity to holiness.

In a practical sense, at least, the following expostulation, which Milton puts into the mouth of the Creator, is applicable here:

—————Nor can justly accuse
 Their Maker, or their making, or their fate,
 As if predestination overruled
 Their will dispos'd by absolute decree
 Or high foreknowledge; they themselves decreed
 Their own revolt, not I; if I foreknew,
 Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault,
 Which had no less prov'd certain unforeknown.
 So without least impulse or shadow of fate,
 Or ought by me immutable foreseen,
 They trespass, authors to themselves in all
 Both what they judge and what they choose.

Can it be true that, “whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved”—and that God “commandeth all men every where to repent,” and yet secretly means to reject the prayer of the penitent? If it be so, then you have a singular ground of security:—for the condemnation is, that the sinner wilfully refuses the offer of salvation; whereas no such offer was made to you; or, it was not in your power to accept it. Are you prepared to take this plea to the Judgment seat?—would you not shudder at a presumption so high, and so daring?

In any such instance as this, it should be remembered that there can not be a serious sense of danger—any deep conviction of sin—or any

sincere desire to be saved, on the terms of the Gospel. All declarations to the contrary are either a vain pretence, or they arise from a most culpable ignorance of the heart. This is plain from the truth of a remark already made—that the speciousness of a difficulty is a test of the sincerity of the Inquirer. The man who is sincere would endeavour to look directly to the object of his wants. He would be aware that he has not time,—and he would not possess inclination—to occupy his mind with matters unrevealed. Or, if a suspicion of this nature flashed before him, it would lead to a more diligent search after the truth, and end in a better knowledge of his condition, as a sinner. But, contrary to this, there is here an important and most dangerous defect, which, while it darkens the prospects of the soul, aggravates the doom which is likely to follow. The truth of this position will be manifest if we consider the following statement:

A failure in the attempt to lay hold of the hope of salvation, implies a fault somewhere; either on the part of the Inquirer, or on that of his God. But the Inquirer exculpates himself, and declares that he “*has done all in his power*;—that his desires have been serious.”

The fault, then, is charged upon the Head of the Universe. Is there not something horrible in this? And is not the disposition which dares undertake it, proudly rebellious, and wholly unfit for the reception of favour?—I do not mean merely undeserving, but in a state unsuited to the operations of mercy. And does not this very failure disclose its own cause, by bringing into play so unhallowed, so selfish, and so petulant a temper? A temper that would

“Snatch from His hand the balance and the rod,
“Rejudge his justice, be the God of God.”

If he who thinks himself refused, would pause a moment, and ponder the effect that refusal has produced, it might not be impossible to discover the reason:—A discovery which might be of infinite importance to his spiritual interest, and, perhaps, the means of securing his end. The first step to truth is the removal of error: And this ill-success of the sinner might have shown him some essential error, if he examined its results in his own bosom. He would be, in consequence of this, nearer his object, and not further from it—nearer, because he would see, more distinctly, both his danger and his wants.

I have said that inclination and despair, in certain states of mind, mutually assist each other, in the ruin of the soul. But what an awful state of heart should we sometimes see, if we could read the secret feelings of the Inquirer, when he abandons the hope before him! We should behold—not the penetrating sorrow which tells the disappointment of a sad heart, and indicates its sincerity—but a latent *satisfaction*,—the high evidence of his hypocrisy. Hear the murmurer, in the pride of self-complacency,—“The fault is not mine; I have no censure to attach to myself!”—Let us ask him, if there be not a self-gratulation on his return to worldliness and to folly? Oh what a mockery of the character and attributes of God! What a challenge to that wrath which bold impiety draws upon itself! And then what availed his resolutions, or his prayers? A little delay has shown him that his conduct has been governed by false pretences; and that, instead of being ready to love the Redeemer, he was prepared to arraign his rectitude and truth!

But an *avowed* abandonment is not universal, even among those who appear to have lost interest in the subject. We hear some stating

their determination to continue their inquiry—
“*I am seeking.*”—Few expressions are more
illusive than this. It may be honestly uttered;
but is very frequently not so. And it is one
of those instances of perverting Scripture lan-
guage, which a common mistake has sanctioned:
a mistake to which I shall advert hereafter.
At present, I would say to such a one—“your
interest in religion diminished in the failure of
your expectations: you were unwilling to ad-
mit to yourself that you were relinquishing all
hope,—for this would have been a painful
thought. You were determined to continue in
the same round of duties, although they were
discharged with insensibility, and heartless-
ness. This course you considered a kind of
neutral agency; in which, if there were no
comfort, there could be no danger. Here, too,
you hoped that some light might gradually
break in upon you: and you profess to “*wait
patiently,*” because it is the direction of the
Word of God. But can this dealing be ap-
proved? Will a heartless round of form lead
you to that grace which you profess to be seek-
ing? And does not this very contentment,
while you are without spiritual peace, tell
against you? You are *seeking*?—then it is for

an object which you undervalue, and which excites no feeling of anxiety. There *is* danger in your present situation, and that most imminent. It is *not* neutral ground on which you are standing. Every hour in which you remain out of Christ, you are increasing your guilt, and diminishing your hope of pardon. And the pretext with which you would satisfy your conscience, is one which favours the natural inclinations of the heart.”—And how frequent are the instances in which a death-like lethargy supervenes! All the little sensibility that had existed, perceptibly giving way to a conscious stupidity: the form of piety adopted, in the place of its principle: And the reluctance to confess to himself that he was returning to the world, gradually lost in its cares and its pleasures.

In such an instance as this, in which the pursuit, so called, may have continued for a long time, the most common result is that of embracing some doctrinal error. The nature of evangelical religion is questioned: so is that of a change of heart: or the latter is discredited altogether: and the self-satisfying reasoning is —“ I may have been mistaken in my expectations. My anxiety has left me; but my pre-

sent peace may be the answer of prayer: and although I can not perceive any difference between my present state, and that of some months since, excepting that habit has reconciled me more to outward forms, may I not be safe?" How readily is stupidity mistaken for a Heavenly peace, after remaining in such a condition as this! And how completely is the soul invested in an armour which no arrow of conviction can penetrate!

Or, where this is not exactly the state of mind in which a long continuance of fruitless form has left the Inquirer, another plea is sometimes advanced, nearly as delusive and dangerous as the last. It is this:—" *I am waiting for a day of power.* I have seen that power displayed in the conversion of others. I continue in the way of it. I remain at the pool until the troubling of the waters."

Nothing is more easy than to deceive a mind in the situation in which we have supposed this to be. Exhausted by its own vain exertions; wearied, and watching for some mystical effect, the most foolish pretexts will bring on a relapse into indolence and inactivity. And the private reflection which serve to direct the attention from all possibility of danger, might

frequently be read in such language as the following:—"God must surely eye me with favour, while I am waiting in patience for his will. And if he do not now grant me the object of my prayer, he will see the virtue of this patience, and remember me in his own good season!" Do you not see how much that is Pharisaical pervades all this? how much of an unhumbled and legal temper? and what erroneous conceptions of the true state of the heart? Do you not see how carelessness and indifference are misnamed? How the sinner arrogates to himself a Christian virtue which is inseparable from faith in Jesus Christ, and builds upon it the expectation of divine favour?

The prevalent mistake which is founded on the Scriptural expression, "a day of power," betokens a gross ignorance of the scheme of redemption. It supposes a particular period assigned by Eternal Counsel, in which alone the Holy Spirit is willing to work in the heart of the sinner—that period independent of any state of mind in which the sinner may be—and that, until then, all desire, or prayer, must be unavailing. I need not detain you by an explanation of this error, in its source, and in its

bearings. A single remark on a misconstrued phraseology will be sufficient: All that time of the Saviour's administration, in what is called his exalted state,—in contra-distinction from what is called his “day of humiliation”—is denominated his “day of power.” And the time at which the sinner first believed, may be considered that in which divine power renewed his heart. And yet it is said to every sinner, “*Now* is the accepted time, *now* is the day of salvation.” Be assured, then, that if he be anticipating some imaginary period, in which God is more willing to accept him, through Jesus Christ, he has embraced an error, which, the longer he holds it, will widen more the distance between him and his Saviour. God demands the whole heart this very moment; and every instant, during which it is detained from him, sends up an additional report against the delinquent.

To all this class of self-excusing, I would apply the remark of one, who, on a bed of illness was asked, “if he was waiting God's pleasure?” answered, “waiting implies *being ready*.” There is much point in this. He who here professes to be waiting, depend upon it, is not ready. There may be very little dif-

ference between his state of mind, and that of him who stands aloof from salvation, with an apology which, if it do not indicate contemptuousness, argues a most sinful indifference—"I hope *my* time will one day come."

There is another expression, corresponding with those I have already mentioned, and equally common: "I have done all that I was directed to do; I now remain until God shall do *his* part." If the utterer would take pains to examine the feelings with which this is said, he would see that they are liable to the same severe charge which we have applied to other excuses;—ignorance that is wilful,—petulance,—or a temporizing policy. It is of little importance which, while their tendency is to keep the sinner beyond the hope of salvation. Could it ever be said of any suppliant,—“you have done all that was demanded at your hands, and yet God has resolved to withhold his promised blessing? May we ever impeach his veracity with impunity?

Much of the language which I have thus quoted, composes a part of that *cant* phraseology—if the term be permitted—so general in partial religious impressions. It is always founded on error: And is either the cause or

the effect of greater repugnance to the doctrines of the Cross. It is indeed surprising what caprices, and what follies, in the heart of the sinner, are brought to light, in the condition I am describing: What inconsistent notions! what absurd expectations! what impertinences! what perverse ideas of God! what wanton impeachment of his holy character! And has such a man a claim upon the spiritual mercies of his Maker?—the very thing which he fancies to be his. And is God under an obligation to hear him?—the very thing he imagines him to be.

Adieu, My Dear Sir. Dare to examine the dispositions of your mind. Tender it to the scrutiny of an Omniscient Being. Pray—and act consistently with such a prayer—"Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked ways in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."*

I am Yours, &c.

* Psalms, cxxxix. 23, 24.

LETTER. IV.

Previous misconceptions—Cause of delay—Any delay or suffering, the fault of the sinner—Mistake relating to the necessity of a certain preparatory process—Scripture examples—Error relating to prayer—"I am not prepared"—"I am not holy enough"—The inconsistency of the complainer—On insensibility—Want of clear views of Sin—Degrees of conviction not necessary to be observed—Why conviction is more difficult to be effected in a man of strict morality—The Gospel invites without reference to the degree of conviction.

MY DEAR SIR,

IF a Heathen, who did not well understand the first principles of the Gospel, were awakened to some sense of his guilt, we might expect him to cry out,—“what shall I do to be saved?” But suppose a man whose home is in Christendom, and who had been well indoctrinated in the truths of Christianity, yet ignorant of its power in his own experience:—suppose him, for the first time, to make the fearful discovery of his lost condition, and of the necessity of personal reconciliation to his God:—would you not imagine the question wholly unnecessary on his part? Would you not say, that to him the path of the convicted soul would be plain—plain as a path in which “the way-faring men, though fools, *need* not err?”

Would you not believe that nothing could stand in his way to a direct approach to the author of salvation? Yes; judging from common analogy, you could hardly doubt, that a mind thus instructed, would know how to advance immediately to the Mercy-Seat. You would look for neither turnings nor windings, in a question that appears to carry its solution with it. See how we mistake! The plan that was so easy becomes intricate, the moment it applies to affairs of our own! The very rules we should have laid down for others, and in which we should have had every confidence, in *their* behalf, we are unable to reduce to practice for *ourselves*.

How shall we account for this? Does conviction darken the understanding? Or does it enfeeble our abilities? Or why, otherwise, should we not appropriate to our own use, what we should have prescribed to others, in similar circumstances?

This is not the place to solve these difficulties, although it might not be hard to do so. The truth, however, is as we have represented it—that competent as one thus instructed might believe himself, to teach others in a matter in which he has had no personal experience, he

finds his ability sadly diminished when the case becomes his own. Instead of proceeding, without waiting for intermediate measures, directly to the Redeemer, we see him, from the first moment of anxiety, enveloped in perplexities of which he had not thought, and which he would have declared entirely extraneous from a sincere inquiry. And he may long linger in this embarrassment, equally unhappy and sinful as it is.

The awakened sinner, who has been accustomed to the sight of others in a similar state of mind, is too apt to form conclusions from what he has thus seen or heard; and to consider exactly the same experience indispensable for himself. "He knew that such a one was a prey of distress, during a given space of time: that such and such was the conflict he sustained; until, at last, the Redeemer pitied his sufferings, and granted an answer to his prayer." Now this whole representation is incorrect; and not only so, but its conclusion is fallacious. All which he heard, or saw, gave him no fair insight into the truth. The simple fact here, and in every one of those cases which are presented in such a form as to lead to the inference that God is keeping the sinner at a distance to

experiment on his feelings and disposition, is as follows:—All delay arose from misconception of the truth as it is in the Gospel—from unwillingness to relinquish cherished sins—or from an unhallowed attempt to treat with the Creator on compromising terms. But never does it arise from any cause that is contradictory to the idea of a freely tendered pardon; or which does not prove, and enhance, the guilt of the sinner. And,—it might be added,—all that pity which is so often expressed for the sufferer, by those around him, is usually misapplied: This sympathy, which wears so amiable an aspect, may, not unfrequently, be in behalf of a struggle discreditable to its subject; and in behalf of sorrows which have their origin in enmity to God. I know there is an apparent sternness in this opinion: but it is inseparable from the Scriptural position—that *all the fault of the sinner's delay is, exclusively, in himself.*

Contrary to this, is that sentiment so generally entertained, relative to the necessity of a *certain preparatory process*, which the sinner, it is supposed, must undergo, previous to his acceptance by a pardoning God. Hence we hear of necessary stages, in the course of

inquiry: unavoidable goals which are to be successively reached. Now all this arises from transplanting the impediments and mistakes which had been in the way of one Inquirer, to that of another: or, from supposing that we are to make provision for mistakes, which are thus considered almost half justifiable because they are common: or,—still worse, it supposes the errors, and their corrections, of one man indispensable in another. And hence those multifarious directions which are sometimes given to the Inquirer—as if he were under an absolute necessity of doing, or suffering, to a certain amount: hence those speculations on the precedence of the operation of certain feelings and graces: And hence many of those abstruser questions, which have been connected with the subject; and which belong rather to the philosophy of the human mind, than to the revealed doctrines of our blessed Saviour. Oh it is in vain, and worse than in vain, to attempt to reach those secret springs which move on the spirit, by divine command, to the activity of a new life. And it is absurd to chalk out a certain course of particular emotions, or cares, for every Inquirer. Adopt it rather, as a fundamental point of belief—as one

that is emphatic, and of practical value,—that, whatever the situation in which the Holy Spirit may find the sinner, in respect either to external circumstances, or the state of his heart, *that* is the situation in which he is bound to surrender himself at once to his God. The correctness of this is plain from the very design of dispensing mercy; which is, not to bring to light any thing acceptable in the Creature, for he has nothing that is so—but to reveal the perfections of God in the gift of pardon, even to the most vile, through his Son Jesus Christ. And any thing which the Inquirer may be taught, or may do, against this design, is against his own interest and the honour of his Maker.

Apostolic example, on this subject, is worthy of attention: When the preaching of Peter, on the day of Pentecost, awakened thousands to a sense of their guilt, he did not wait for any interval to complete a preparatory process; but carried their attention immediately to Him whom they had crucified.* And afterwards, when the same Apostle charged others of that infatuated people with the murder of Messiah, without delaying to ascertain the ef-

* Acts. iii. 12—26.

fect of this accusation on their minds, he bids them repent; and, in the same breath, proclaims the hope of pardon.* Such too was the course adopted by the Apostle Paul, in Antioch.† These inspired men certainly knew well that a direction to any intermediate experience between the knowledge of the truth and its acceptance, would have kept the sinner in an unnecessary suspense, while it attached an uncertainty to the scheme of the Gospel.

In full consistency with this, the design of the Saviour may be discovered in some of the instructions which fell from his own lips. Let us take the example of the Prodigal Son: I know that the interpretation of this Parable is generally supposed to refer to the Jews and Gentiles—the former being the elder, and the latter the younger son—and that therefore, as relating to the external kingdom of Christ, it can not apply to individual experience, except, as Divines say, “by way of accommodation.” The *moral* which is drawn from it, in this interpretation, is, I have no doubt, consistent with the truth: but not with the design which our Lord seems to have had before him. The whole context refers to the murmuring

* Acts, iv. 11, 12.

† Acts, xiii. 24—41.

of the Pharisees, because Publicans and Sinners were admitted into association with Christ. And it is, therefore, literally the returning sinner who is represented in the Prodigal Son. In this beautiful Parable, the penitent child “comes to himself.” Unsatisfied wants, and the danger of starvation, stare him in the face. He has the *sense* of a truth of which his judgment might have convinced him before. And what is the consequence? does he linger? Does he wait to make himself better fitted to receive compassion? No: the truth of his own sad condition and the ability of his Parent to relieve him from it, come home together to his bosom: and his determination is,—“I will arise!”—to do what? to carry apologies to his father? no: to say, “I have sinned.” But the most interesting point in the tale, is that which follows—His father saw him “a great way off;” and with all the eagerness of parental affection, hastens to meet him. The consciousness of the sinner that he is “a great way off;” gives no reason why he should stay there, or why he may not be met by a merciful Saviour. This case certainly supposes the sorrow of the penitent, and that for sin committed against an affectionate parent: yet is it of practical appli-

cation to the awakened sinner in the first moment of his anxiety.

But lest there should be some remaining doubt in your mind, whether something meritorious, and of self-made preparation, should not be accomplished by the Inquirer, previous to his approach to the cross, I would go even further, and say, that if no uneasiness had been created in the bosom, and if he had been only this instant warned of his iniquity, and admonished to repent without delay, such an admonition is not to be parted from the peradventure of pardon.

Take another Scriptural example: An unprincipled man is rebuked by one of the Apostles, with a spirit and power which awed and confounded him. The culprit had committed a crime, which to this day bears his name: But the pungency of reproof was not permitted to go by itself. He was commanded to repent, and "pray God" for forgiveness.* Now such a direction as this was a mission to the Redeemer directly. It was sending him immediately for pardon, to the very One he had offended. No obstacle was supposed in his way, unless it be that of *moral* inability. No ex-

traordinary task was proposed. And every moment of delay, under any pretence, would have been increasing his guilt and his danger. How exceedingly out of place, then, would have been any of those questions which are often agitated on this subject?—whether such a person be capable of prayer?—or whether, with a temper so estranged from God, attempting such an exercise would not be mockery? In the present instance, the direction was most probably given through the inspiration of the Holy Ghost himself.

I am aware that from the Scriptural truth, —*the prayers of the wicked are an abomination to the Lord*,*—it has been argued that the unrenewed man ought not to attempt such an act: and that if he did so, it must be unacceptable to his Maker: And the alarmed sinner himself will sometimes dread the danger of adding to his sinfulness by calling upon his pure and holy Creator. And yet it is certain that the advice which commends him at once to Jesus Christ, as his only hope, is a direction to prayer. It is indeed perfectly true that the natural heart is far from being an object of complacency with God. And it is not less

* There is no such passage.

true, that much of the distress which he encounters, and much of his mortified feeling under serious impressions, arise from a rebellious disposition, and an obstinate temper of unbelief. And, so far as these exist, he is under the frown, and not the compassion of his God: And the sympathy which a pious bosom would entertain for him would be no other than that which it would manifest towards the infatuated devotee of sin, who continues in crime while he is reaping its fruits of sorrow. But then on the other hand, the earnest desire for salvation from ruin—implanted as it is by nature, and aroused as it is under conviction—is surely not offensive to our Maker. And so far as this alone is concerned, he is truly an object of pity both to the Christian and his God.

A quotation from a late learned Divine occurs to me, as of so much importance, on this part of our subject, as to merit transcription:

“The prayers of convinced sinners, it is said, are insincere, and therefore abominable to God. In answer to this objection, I observe, that a sinner whether convinced or not, may undoubtedly pray with insincerity, in all instances; but there is no invincible necessity, that his prayers should always be insincere,

notwithstanding he is a sinner. A sinner may from a sense of his danger and misery, pray as sincerely to be saved from that danger and misery as a saint. His disposition, I acknowledge, is still sinful; and his prayers are wholly destitute of moral goodness. But the mere wish to be saved from suffering is neither sinful nor holy. On the contrary, it is merely the instinctive desire of every percipient being; without which he would cease to be a percipient being. That there is any thing hateful to God in this wish, whether expressed in prayer or not, I can not perceive, nor do I find it declared either by Reason, or Revelation. It may indeed be united with other desires, and those either virtuous or sinful; according to the prevailing character of the mind in which it exists; and the whole state of the mind may be accordingly denominated either virtuous, or sinful. Still this desire is neither morally good, nor morally evil; and therefore, neither pleasing, nor displeasing, as such, in the sight of God.

“ That God pities sinners as mere sufferers will not be doubted: Otherwise he would not have sent his Son to redeem them from sin and misery. That he pities them more,

when strongly affected with a sense of their guilt and misery, than when at ease in both, will, I think, be readily believed. The sinner is certainly not less an object of compassion, but much more, when feeling the evils in which he is involved; and I can see no reason why he may not be an object of divine compassion on that account, as well as ours. The cries of the sinner for mercy are not, therefore, in themselves sinful; and there is nothing to make the sinner less, but much, apparently, to make him more an object of pity.”*

To this it may be added, that the prayers of Cain, of the children of Israel, of the Ninevites, and of other unregenerate men, have been answered. The doctrine, then, which enjoins an immediate approach to the great hearer of prayer, or, in other words, requires our coming to Jesus Christ immediately, is equally consistent with both reason and the Word of God.

I can not doubt that the Inquirer may be, in a certain sense, truly sincere, while he hangs back in expectation of a kind of mental discipline—a routine which he does not understand,

* Dwight's Theology, Sermon 76.

but which he has been taught to anticipate. And hence his common reply to the repeated solicitations of the Gospel is, "*I am not prepared.*" But he has conceived wrong notions of the scheme of Redemption. He has adopted some ideas which obscure its light, or embarrass its simplicity with perplexities which ought to have no connexion with it. How strange a posture of affairs is this which is supposed to be his! The Inquirer is willing—so is God. The Inquirer is waiting for the Redeemer,—and the Redeemer waiting for him! How inconsistent with the design of the Bible! How derogatory to the character of the Saviour!

There is another expression, which, although not intended to be of exactly the same import with the last, indicates a temper somewhat similar: "*I am not holy enough to apply for salvation.*" Let us give this a few minute's attention:

That the awakened sinner is not to remain idle is very certain. He is to renounce every habit, or practice, which he knows be guilty. He is to weigh his actions by the standard of God's holy Law. He is to look carefully into his disposition and temper; and to turn from

the snares to which they expose him. He is to abandon all that is at enmity with the will of his Maker. But the whole of this is contemporaneous with his approach to Christ: it is part of the very act of "arising to go to his father." But to consider this a preparative course; and his success here a preliminary of his own, is obviously incongruous: for it is plain to him that he can not succeed in his unaided efforts to obey the dictates of an enlightened conscience. He will require that divine assistance which mercy has tendered. But the very act of seeking this, is that of approaching Christ. The pretence, therefore, that he will remain until he is holier, is an absurdity in terms.

This reason for keeping back, moreover, perverts the requirements of God; and looks to salvation, not as a gift, but as a reward of holiness. Or, if this be denied, does he not contemplate a partial change, to be self-effected, and to be accepted as an earnest of his disposition to accomplish more? Some degree of self-complacency is to accompany this offering: and there will be quite as much in preparing it.

But is all this disavowed? Does such a one

disclaim the idea of a reward? Does he say,—
“*I am now so vile that I tremble at the thought of entering into the presence of a pure and holy God; and for this reason I would watch and fast, and examine myself, that I may be in a better state for believing in Christ?*” To do all this is well: But to render the doing of it the reason and the means of keeping him from the Cross, is turning that which may be good into an instrument of evil. Alas, how slowly we receive the blessed truth, that salvation is *free*! Even when the heart has been in some little measure humbled, it opens with apparent reluctance for its reception.

The sinner knows that he stands in need of mercy; but he clings to the idea that he is to render himself a fit recipient. He will tell us that he does not deserve Heaven, and yet, with a strange equivocation, he hopes to deserve the grace which is to carry him thither. He does not expect to merit pardon, but he does expect to win the divine approbation which is to lead to his forgiveness. What contradictions! and how contradictory to the Word of God! for the design of the blessed Gospel was expressly to show “the exceeding riches” of grace, and

to let the transgressor see, not only that he may be saved, but that in his salvation the undeserved mercy of Jehovah is clearly manifest. Attach, then, the smallest merit to the sinner, and this design is completely frustrated. Favour is changed into Justice,—Grace is transformed into Debt.

Oh, why should not the truth be received as it is? The physician of Gilead is not only able, but ready, to administer a cure to all who sincerely apply to him. And can it be necessary that they should be better when they approach him, if he can heal them as they are? It is indeed to be regretted that the simplest of heavenly directions, are so often obscured by artificial dogmas, and by laboured descriptions of certain holy dispositions, as pre-requisites for all who would venture into the presence of Christ. How common, therefore, is the prayer that the Lord would grant a certain something—it is not known what—or enable us to reach a certain point—it is not known where—in preparation for accepting the terms of the Gospel!—All of which means neither more nor less than a desire that the Creator would enable us to achieve something as the ground of acceptance with himself. Here is a palpable

inconsistency—a prayer for a gift which is to become the ground of merited reward! And yet such inconsistencies are not rare in the conduct of the awakened sinner.

But there may be a principle, deeper than this, concealed under the expression, “*I am not holy enough.*” It is sometimes the mere cloak of a spurious humility: for it is expressed when the utterer cherishes a latent hope that this low opinion of himself will lead to the divine complacency. And if it were sifted, we should see the mingling of pride.

One thing is certain,—that while such a man professes to esteem so highly the holiness of God as to feel unworthy to approach him, he practically denies other points of his character, for which Jehovah claims our homage, and which are the medium of access to his presence.

But we will dismiss this subject. There is far more interest in the one which you have suggested in the following words: “*My heart is insensible to the truths of which my judgment is convinced: I am incapable of feeling on the only matter which is worthy of emotion.*” It is doubtful whether, in the whole mass of complaints uttered by Inquirers, there

is one more universal than this: and it is certain that there is not one more painful. But it is not confined to the Inquirer. It is very frequently heard from the lips of the Christian: and it is, not seldom, one of those mistakes which arise from a sincere jealousy of self. I am acquainted with some whose whole lives are shaded by this supposed insensibility: Who invariably condemn themselves in their most favoured moments: and who are ever ready, on this account, to appropriate to themselves, all the evidences of hypocrisy: Who, when the tender mercies of Christ, or his sufferings and death, are the subjects of meditation, are prepared to exclaim, "What goodness! what love!"—and yet complain that all this is unaffected to their hearts. There are many who admit, with apparent admiration, all that is general in the fullness and loveliness of Christ; but who find a serious difficulty, when they think of a particular application to themselves, or when they look for a personal operation in their own souls. They can unite with others in admiration and praise when they consider the excellencies of the Saviour: But, because their feelings are not sufficiently strong, unbelief begins to question and limit the mercies of

God; praise gives way to silence,—admiration is changed into doubt. And hence that cheerlessness and melancholy which attach themselves to the devotional exercises of many; and which, while they pervade the whole mind, give it a cast of dejection which faith alone can alter. It is not rare to hear such a person say, “I could almost desire some trial, or affliction, that might melt down this heart of stone—that some feeling might flow—that I might enjoy some little evidence of a soul susceptible of love. But as it is, unmoved as I am,—my God,—in a sinful lethargy,

“ ’Tis just, I own, that thou depart
From so insensible a heart:
Nor would I shun the sad decree
To spend my days in grief for thee!
’Tis not the painful I deplore
But sin’s benumbing, hard’ning power!

Here is a cause of distress which would appear, to many, almost beyond the reach of remedy. And while the sufferer continues to look at it as such, it would not be easy to apply a remedy, even were it near at hand.

It should not be denied that tenderness of feeling, is, to a certain extent, necessary. It is impossible to experience the power of divine truth without it. But there are some errors

in this state of mind which are worthy of our attention. And it is well worth while to attempt their removal: To do so, we will commence with the following sentence:

We may as readily deceive ourselves in respect to emotions arising from a religious subject as in respect to those which exist in a matter of benevolence. To illustrate this remark:—A statement of human misery and wretchedness, made before two persons, may produce the following effects: one may be touched with sympathy; and the tears which flow, may lead to a persuasion of tenderness of heart. The other may hear the tale with an unaltered eye, and yet think deeply. The first may shrink from entering the abode of squalid misery, and exhibit no movement of principle; while the second will devote time and care to mitigate the evils of the sufferer. These are things of daily observation. So there are those who can shed tears of apparent sorrow, when the pathetic tale of a Saviour's life and death is told; while the fixed thought of others may be accompanied with unmoistened cheeks: but the feelings of the first may be "as the early dew," while the impressions of the second are as indelible as the etchings of

steel. Now which was the *neighbour* here? which the Levite, and the Samaritan? A difference—a most essential difference—must be admitted to exist, in both physical and moral constitution, and it should not be forgotten that while a physical weakness may lead to what is called tenderness of feeling, this ready access to tears which relieve an oppression, may prevent an abiding effect on the mind. I would not say that it is always thus: But I would not hesitate to say, that we are not always proper judges of our feelings; and that the self-jealous Inquirer is very likely to deceive himself in the judgment he passes.

The truth is, there is no quality belonging to human nature, on which more stress is laid, than on susceptibility of feeling. It is the hope of thousands, who have no just idea of their true condition, but who regard this susceptibility as a demonstration that their hearts are open to conviction, and their consciences unseared. Others attach to it a moral quality, with which it is supposed to have an inseparable connexion. Both these notions are false. In the first case, sensibility may be merely a material of the physical constitution, always liable to excitability, even while the moral

sense becomes blunted. What a melancholy evidence have we of this in disappointments, in bereavements, and in all the changes which are rung by sorrow! A variety of circumstances, wholly disconnected with the subject of religion itself, may render us more alive to a melting impression at one time, than at another, while we are as far from repentance as ever.

In the second case, it is not uncommon to find the impenitent sinner consoling himself in the thought that his heart is sympathetic: attributing his sufferings, before the spectacle of misery, to some intrinsic worth in his nature: while there may be as much virtue in any other feeling within him as in this; and while this very sympathy might lead him, if he were a Civil Judge, to sacrifice justice, and the weal of society, to relieve a personal and lawless sympathy.

I repeat it,—and you will pardon the repetition,—a certain tenderness of feeling is necessary, as an evidence of our earnestness; but its extent is not to be prescribed, and we are not judges of it, always, ourselves.

Nor is this all: apart from what I have said, the same subjects will not affect constitutions of equal feeling, in the same way, nor to the

same extent. And yet they may produce the same results by apparently different means.— Now carry this remark through all the diversities of character which they may reach: and you will observe how incorrect would be any general conclusion from the mere intensity of emotion.

But we may advance beyond this: there are those whose conduct is governed by their sensibilities; whose sense of duty is dependent on emotions; the two rising, or departing together. Here principle and feeling are one. And we, accordingly, find the zeal of such persons as fluctuating as their excitements.

Mistakes on this subject may be, and often are, productive of serious mischief. This is evident in those cases in which weak, but perhaps sincere, Christians, are examining their frames of mind even to a partial exclusion of the principle of obedience: And in which, too, they may unwarily condemn a temper that is unobtrusive and silent, because the workings of the heart are not visible in the unfilled eye.

But while all these may be errors of the Christian himself—errors by which he is deceived in respect to both his own heart and

those of others—the awakened sinner is still more in danger of deception. He has read of the sufferings of others, or heard them described; and he conceives of a uniform rule. He understood, in some measure, the extent of these sufferings, and deems a participation necessary. He may have taken his conceptions from the ministrations of the Holy Word, in which a delineation of the returning penitent may be justly given, without possibly suiting his own circumstances, in all their particulars. Besides,—when he reads forms of devotion, or even a prayer for the penitent, or a hymn to a similar purpose, he discovers the tone of feeling too high to correspond with his own: and he forgets that no precise rule of admeasurement was ever intended; or that such forms may be designed often, rather to lift, than to meet, the state of personal feeling: And that, even then, their authors could never have expected an equal effect upon all who heard or saw them. But unhappily, our inferences are prone to rashness, in this state of mind: And we are apt to attach an undue authority to the compositions, as well as the opinions, of pious men.

It is a sad mistake when the *pungency* of

sorrow is deemed the proportion of sincerity; and artificial efforts are made to promote and sustain a deep work of the passions, without directing the mind to any other than this single end. And it is hence the Inquirer, after being made sensible of his condition as a sinner, is sometimes kept back from the proper object of his inquiry, in order to obtain a certain state of distress with which he is directed to meet his Saviour. And with this in view, the Law, in all its terrors, is placed before him. Its thunders are repeated, and its flashes renewed.

I have already intimated that no man is likely to lay hold of the conditions of the grace of God, without a sense of his necessitous situation. But it is delusive to suppose that the Law, disconnected from the Gospel, will produce this important effect. It may furnish a knowledge of sin; for this is its proper tendency. But while it stands alone, though it compel conviction, it will be as likely to drive to desperation, or to legal views, as to fit the soul for an understanding of God. Believe me, it is in the death of Jesus Christ, that the curse of transgression is most clearly legible: While it is here alone that an antidote is offered to the

wounds of conscience. Without a survey of this, the Law can never be made the instrument of evangelical repentance. And, with all the alarm which the sight of impending doom may create in the mind of the sinner, there will not be a single disposition, which will either place him in a better condition for receiving the mercy of his God, or produce a single desire that could lead him to true holiness.

Such a prescription, then, is unscriptural. And I may add, that its effects are likely to terminate in an abandonment of the whole matter on the part of the Inquirer; and in leaving him more completely out of the reach of conviction than ever. And yet this prescription most usually meets the views of an awakened sinner, who often looks with as much assurance for a certain preparative measure of feeling, as for the final issue of conversion. “*Oh that I could feel!*” he frequently exclaims; while the very earnestness of his manner betrays his sensibility. “I am willing to suffer any thing, or to undergo any anguish that would bring hope to my soul, or make me an object of attention to my God!” What vanity of effort is here! And how it diverts the mind from its

proper object! But all this is the suggestion of an uneasy and inconsiderate mind.

Can it be, My Dear Sir, that Jesus Christ demands penance at our hands? Have not the expiatory sufferings which are necessary for our salvation, been undergone by himself? And is it not true that "*there remaineth no more sacrifice for sin?*" It is an idea of natural religion, which has been incorporated into a corruption of Christianity, that the sufferings we may inflict on ourselves can be of avail in the great object of salvation. That disposition, then, which renders you willing to endure any thing as part of the terms tendered to God, in exchange for what he alone can give,—whatever vehement desire it may be supposed to exhibit,—is radically legal in its character.

I admit that a lamentation over hardness of heart, or an expression of sorrow because the judgment and affections do not act efficiently together, is consistent with the most unleavened sincerity. But then to require a given degree of animal feeling in all constitutions, before the soul is supposed in a fit state to surrender itself to the Redeemer, is an intermeddling with the simple plan of the Gospel.

I beseech you, let these things alone. Be not among the number of those who stand aloof from the Cross, because they have not undergone a due portion of suffering: who grow impatient under delay,—indifferent,—and then retreat back forever:—the sad history of many a soul. Never attempt to take the gauge of your sorrow, or to look for mercy with any hope proportioned to mere emotions: Rather take no note of your anxiety. But inquire of your own heart,—“am I not a sinner condemned, justly, before God? Am I not utterly helpless in myself? And yet is there not grace, full and free, offered in the Gospel, to every such sinner?”

Before I conclude this letter, let me invite your attention to a few words, touching another complaint—“*I have reason to apprehend that I have no conviction of sin. It is true, my judgment is convinced; and my understanding assents to the awful truth that I am guilty before God. Yet I have no clear views of my sinfulness. The whole subject is confused to my sight. I wish to confront my iniquities as they are; and I would make them distinct to my view, whatever pain it might occasion. But I labour to*

effect this, in vain." This difficulty belongs to no particular class of experience. It may be connected with much distress; and may be mentioned in the bitterness of despair. Or, it may belong to a more calm, but not less serious, operation of mind. But wherever it may be found, it carries with it a train of apprehensions for which there may be much reason, and which are often exceedingly perplexing.

It is true that without some knowledge of our sinfulness we shall hardly approach the Saviour in a posture of acceptance. And it is equally true, that a *clear* discovery of our guilt and depravity, is highly desirable. But still it would be inexpedient to propose any invariable rule of judgment: or to require the same distinctness of conception, in every awakened sinner. That very diversity of moral and physical constitution, which produces a variety of degrees of feeling, may act with very similar effects on our conceptions of truth. I have known some of the most exemplary of Christians, who were always ready to repeat the complaint before us: but who, notwithstanding, possessed almost every evidence that could be satisfactory to themselves, of having passed from death unto life. I have known others, who,

in the commencement of their career, were equally solicitous on this account, but to whom the evil of their hearts was more distinctly presented as they advanced in life. And there may be frames of spirit within all of us, which, without any assignable cause, render our views on this subject more discriminating, or more confused.

But I can come nearer to your state of mind by bringing before you two examples of hourly observation: The grossly impure or profane have always near them such tangible proof of their guilt, that if they are awakened to serious reflection at all, they can not escape a sense of the evil. Even the laws and sentiments of society arraign them: and perhaps lead them, in a moment of thoughtfulness, to compare their conduct with a more holy standard. Each act stands out prominently, and marks the temper and dispositions of the soul: and while it displays a total unfitness for Heaven, justifies the sentence of condemnation. Such a man may be painfully sensible of his wickedness, even before he has entered on a close examination of his life:—There may be a living conscience within a heart that is dead. But, whenever such an investigation is fairly begun, remorse

will accompany it with equal pace. There can be no subterfuge here; and there is very little room for sophistry. Whatever this sinner may finally do, he now pleads guilty to the charge of a witness within him.

On the other hand, one who is distinguished by an amiable and moral deportment, may be confronted by no such accusers. The secret belief of his safety, which he has so naturally cherished, and which is so congenial with our natural ideas of accountability, assists in concealing the true state of his heart. Now the difficulty of convincing such a one of the evils of his soul, consists in the following truth—that *actions are more prominent to the sight, than motives; when the former are flagrant, the attention may be arrested and retained by them, with comparative ease; but motives lie deeper; and it requires some strong inducement to lead us to examine them.*

I have seen a good illustration of this, in a pious young friend who is still living, an ornament to the Church to which he is attached:—During a visit which he once paid me, while under distressing concern, he gave me substantially the following statement:—“I do not know that I have ever been accused of what

the world would call immorality. The acquittal of a satisfied conscience has constituted much of my happiness. And even to this day, I do not know that either of my parents ever impeached my conduct of a more serious crime than neglect or carelessness. While I have sat under the sound of the Gospel, I have admitted its excellence, and always believed myself embraced within its promises. I can remember when the affecting interview between the Saviour and the young Ruler, was the subject of a discourse which awakened others around me, my own mind was, for a short season, startled. I wished to be made sensible of sin, but I could recollect no obvious charge against myself. I could fix my eye on nothing which could rivet its gaze; and, as I passed willingly and rapidly to the conclusion that I had kept nothing back from my God, my peace was not long disturbed. During all this time I knew nothing of myself. It had not occurred to me that the heartlessness with which I discharged every duty,—the secret pride which followed it,—and the insipidity and tastelessness of devotion,—were melancholy proofs of my unfitness for the society of Heaven. Or, if a doubt ever remained in my mind, it was easy to conclude that any

change which I needed, would accompany my transition into another world. I did not then see how this unscriptural reliance opposed the moral government of God; nor how the hope I had cherished arrogantly superseded salvation by Grace. In the midst of this security, a circumstance occurred which threw me as near despair as I had been to presumption: It was a temptation to commit a sin where there was every thing to entice; and, in the event of detection, not much to lose, in the eye of the world. It was a proposal of a Sabbath day's excursion of pleasure. There was little time to reflect; and each moment swelled the force of temptation. I yielded. And from that hour, remorse has never left me. In vain have I argued with myself that this is a solitary evil. In vain I appealed to my own heart. Even that seems changed. I see no more evidence of its innocence. I behold a selfish policy in all my motives, and a hatred of that holiness which I had flattered myself I esteemed. I am lost. And my doom is aggravated by the remembrance of a life and a peace in direct opposition to the scheme of the Gospel." It is not necessary to finish this story: the application is plain.

But let us suppose the inducements to inquiry to be strong in any such case. Let the judgment be convinced that all this morality is of no avail. Still, while there seems little palpable to lay hold of,—and nothing which appears very near to admonish,—and almost nothing to awaken the feelings to a lively interest in the subject,—it may be exceedingly difficult to fix and concentrate the attention; or to single out the lurking evils of the heart. And yet if we were able to complete this purpose, as I have already said, the effects will vary in different persons, although the same end may be as certainly accomplished.

The false conclusion, however, on the whole subject, consists in imagining that a certain intensity and fullness of conviction is required on the part of the sinner, before he is at liberty to recognize the invitations of grace as applicable to himself;—that this conviction must be well-defined, and its action regular. The Redeemer once said—“they that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick:” and hence it has been concluded that unless there be a consciousness of the power of disease, all application must be in vain. But the Redeemer could not have meant that none stand in need

of a physician but such as are fully sensible of their state. His expression was a reproof to the querulous Pharisees, who considered themselves whole, and the Publicans and Sinners sick. And this the Saviour seems to have admitted for the sake of argument, while he rendered it a reason for his associating with those of disreputable name. But, surely, he did not mean to intimate that all these degraded men had a just sense of their guilt, and that it was expedient, for this reason, that he should associate with them.

Apply to this subject a passage from the prophet Isaiah, which plainly refers to the invitations of sovereign grace through the future Messiah:—"Ho every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money, come ye, buy and eat; yea come buy wine and milk without money, and without price."* The thirst referred to in this case was certainly not for spiritual blessings. It was for earthly happiness only. It was the panting of an immortal soul for pleasure. And it was indicated by toil and expense to purchase enjoyment which our smitten earth has not to give. The remonstrance which follows this passage tells

us as much:—"Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which satisfieth not." There is no necessary connexion between such a desire as this, and that hungering for righteousness of which the Saviour spoke in his Sermon on the Mount. And the same may be said of his address on the last day of the Feast.

The degree of the conviction of sin, then, has nothing to do with the offer of salvation. This is put into the hands of all. And it is intended to meet the necessities of every Inquirer after happiness.

You are to look to the Gospel, My Dear Sir, for that peace which your soul desires; and not to your particular mental impressions. And you see the reasonableness of this, in the fact that the man who is under the most powerful evangelical convictions, is the last to consider them acceptable on their own account. Let your convictions then, be what they may, *they* are never to afford you satisfaction in themselves.

Adieu—remember that, "by grace are ye saved through faith: and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God; *not of works*, lest any man should boast."

I am yours, &c.

LETTER V.

Complaint of irresolution—Nature of unstable resolutions—Peculiarity of situation—The folly of speculating on the expected change—Vain fancies—"God will not pardon *me*"—"I do not see how the promises can be fulfilled in myself"—The sufficiency of pardon—Advice.

MY DEAR SIR,

WHEN I adverted, in my Third Letter, to that buoyancy of feeling which is so frequently a subject of complaint with certain Inquirers, and which so often leads to a desperate renunciation of the whole pursuit, I did not mean to confound this complaint with that of any other sense of irresolution: For there are certainly many who mourn, with bitterness of heart, over the changes of an irresolute and wavering mind, and yet who have no characteristic levity of disposition. Irresolution is the lament of many a Christian. And the very language in which you have expressed your feelings may be the utterings of a soul whose supreme affections are given to God: But it may likewise be adopted by one who is influenced by a temporary earnestness, and never comes to a favourable decision. You tell me—"There are times when the object of

my salvation assumes an overwhelming importance; when every thought is engrossed by it: and when it would seem impossible to divert my attention from the reflections it occasions: And yet, the next hour, insensibility succeeds; and I can not recall a single idea, as it was. There is a fluctuating operation of the mind which seems peculiar to the subject. In the event of ordinary affliction, I have noted a sense of my loss to vary; but even when it was least intense, and when my faculties were abstracted in some degree by other things, I was conscious of an oppressive weight on my heart. But here, on the contrary, I discover a vacillation for which I can not account—a rapid transition from interest to stupidity.”

There is nothing extraordinary in all this, although the subject of such experience is apt to attribute much mystery to it; to imagine a powerful supernatural agency employed against him; or, to suspect that either his natural peculiarities shut him out from the hope into which others enter, or that God, from some unrevealed cause will not pardon him; or else, that he must, in some fatal moment, have committed the Unpardonable Sin: And such suspi-

cions, you tell me, have often covered your prospects with darkness.

I confess that where this difficulty exists, if it do not lead to the suspicions you have noted, it may very easily end in some other conclusion of despair. And there are some minds, which, from habit or constitution, must necessarily encounter it: Minds which take their present tone from their last associates; retain an impression from the last object of attention, to give way to the next: never uniform in their character for the space of a day. In such a case, we should look for this complaint. And important as retirement is, in all instances of religious inquiry, we should here, particularly, urge a seclusion from any objects, or occupations, which are not within the sphere of the most indispensable duty; and an unremitted confinement of attention to the great matter of salvation. And the advice would not be different from this, which we should be disposed to give, where irresolution arises from the slowness of the impression made on the mind.

In either case, the consciousness of irresolution is painful, and often discouraging in the extreme. The awakened sinner, in the first hour of alarm, determines with much earnest-

ness, that he will not permit his thoughts to be diverted from the great concern of eternal life. Some intrusive trifler engages his attention: but he returns from his wanderings to seriousness again, ashamed of himself, and perhaps uneasy for the consequences. The same process takes place again and again. Irresolution becomes a habit; and the sinner loses all confidence in the bare possibility of a happy issue. Or, where such is not the result, the mind acquires an unprofitable restlessness, and becomes almost incapable of fixedness of thought. Some extraordinary power would appear necessary to impart an habitual seriousness, by altering the very shape and texture of the mind.

This picture is strengthened, when we recollect the reviews which such a man takes of the past. When, it may be, at the very time of his arrival at a point of renewed seriousness, he remembers that he had reached this more than once before, and was led from it again to perfect listlessness and indifference: when he can remember, too, exactly similar operations of his mind; and, as if he had recorded his thoughts at the time, he is able to ponder them over, and to see in them the very state which

distinguishes him now. No train of reflections can be more dampening than those which follow, where retrospections of this character are fully indulged. Without even an active conviction of sin, he may feel the dull influence of anticipated lethargy stealing over his spirits—and all effort seems a mockery, alike to his soul, and his God.——

“I can not weep! I dare not pray!
The very source of tears is dry!
And what—when hope is lost for aye—
Avails the prayer of agony?
A dark cloud lowers before mine eye—
A chain is twined around my heart—
I can not pierce that clouded sky—
I can not tear those bands apart.”

The principal part of the original fault, in this melancholy case, consists in the defective nature of the resolutions which were so often broken. I have already said, that it is possible to resolve with such a vehemence of feeling as entirely to overlook our natural weakness, and, in the ardour of our determination, to forget utterly the strength of our foes. And thus we may offer our prayers for divine aid, while we feel so confident in ourselves that there is very little sincerity in the petition. We may imagine that we possess the two ingredients of a successful resolve—reliance on God, and self-

determination,—while there lurks within the heart all that could keep us apart from spiritual assistance, and while very little pains would enable us to detect an unhallowed and presumptuous confidence.

Other resolutions are formed in the season of affliction; and the state of mind which prompted them, may promise no better issue than the last. There is no condition in which we are more liable to deceive ourselves, than that of temporal adversity. The partial subduement of passion which personal grief has effected, is mistaken for meekness; the diversion of thoughts from objects of recent attention, is a fancied change of taste and desire. A sense of care and dreariness takes the name of some Christian grace: And the mourner already imagines himself to have made an easy transition from worldliness to piety. Or, if he do not assume so bold a conclusion, the resolutions which he forms are entirely dependent on the intensity of his sorrow; and his expectations of success are derived from the same source.

This is a sad misapplication of the leadings of an afflictive providence; which were designed, not to achieve his salvation by any

special influence in themselves, but to direct him to faith and repentance.

But what should be done where a sense of irresolution, and of moral weakness, produces an influence so discouraging? Is there reason for despair? By no means. All this is a sad proof of human helplessness: But it is no evidence against the power of Christ to save. Such a one should feel humbled; but not disheartened. The recollection of the past should only furnish a strong argument for implicit reliance on the Saviour; while it should teach him to lean no more on himself: and the very feelings which it might produce in the bosom, if they were rightly applied, would be salutary. He might see that his case is desperate; but that it is only a desperation in his own resources. It furnishes a reason why he should hope no more from mere human efforts; but it presents, too, a plea for the entire surrender of the soul to Jesus,—“*Oh I can do nothing!*” exclaims the agitated and desponding spirit, as he comes down from his exertion and labour. “True,”—I would say,—“you can do nothing. The Word of God has affirmed this before you admitted it; you are brought only to an experimental conviction of what

you would not believe until this moment. Receive, then, more readily the converse of this truth—*Christ can do all things for you.* Surrender, therefore, your heart to him *now*, when the lesson of your own insufficiency is so plain. Behold, the Redeemer is emphatically denominated the strength of them that believe: and the invitation of the Gospel is unto the sensibly weak.”

Alas, how sad is it, when this very essential discovery of indecision and imbecility, to which the Scriptures had pointed, has been made in our own experience, only to be perverted to evil, instead of leading to the Redeemer!

The idea of “*some peculiarity of situation, or some singular temperament of mind, excluding you from a state which you desire to obtain,*” is not uncommon, much as you complain of it.

If we could read the feelings of all Inquirers, it is probable we should find this impression written upon most of them. The frequenter of scenes of fashion and folly,—and the man in humble walks of life,—the nurtured child of Christian care, and the neglected offspring of Godless parents,—the vain and the proud,—

the inconsiderate and the thoughtful,—have their peculiar difficulties. Indeed, all habits, views, or feelings, which we may have cherished, previous to conviction of divine truth, will produce their appropriate, and corresponding effects on the mind, at this crisis. Some of these may cause more serious perplexities than others; yet all the conduct, or maxims, of life that is past, will carry their consequences on, to thought or to feeling: And we may be unable to discriminate between these effects and the natural state of the heart. It is hence the Inquirer may think his lot singularly hard; and that of another comparatively easy, without being able to judge between the two. But then, apart from this,—when the awakened sinner has been disappointed in his anticipations; when he has not found the path he is travelling such as he expected it; and he is unable to account for the cares which embarrass him, it is a very natural conclusion at which he arrives, that his experience varies from that of any other; and that an inconceivable something forms a barrier between him and his God. And, not unfrequently, in searching for this, he leaves the track of plain duty; and wanders, he knows not where. And then

what a disposition is there to look around for analogies,—to inquire into the experience of others,—to institute comparisons,—and to derive encouragement or despair from sources foreign from the great object of salvation!

A single consideration ought to banish all apprehensions produced by this supposed singularity: The scheme of the Gospel, and the invitations of Scripture, are designed to meet every exigency. And if the cares and doubts of the Inquirer were a thousand times more distressing than they are, they would not furnish the least evidence against this truth. And were I about to account for the unhappy conclusions which are so often drawn, in this exigency, I would examine the present habits and practices of the complainer, in order to do so. And here it would be easy to discover the mind, watching the state of excitement,—speculating on its changes,—impatient and eager. Oh how widely different is that more successful course of conduct which renders our difficulties a reason and a subject for prayer; which makes all that is discouraging an argument for perseverance; and which, taking hold of the precepts of God, turns them, after the

example of the Psalmist, into materials of heartfelt petition!*

But knowing as little as we do of the hearts of others, and yet entering into this needless comparison between ourselves and them—and judging, as we do, from what is visible to the eye, it is not astonishing that we often find little resemblance between ourselves and them. Nor is it a wonder that even the Christian very often believes his religious experience dissimilar to that of his brethren around him. But still, the grand and leading principles of human nature are every where the same; “as in water, face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man.” It is, therefore, worse than unwise to imagine the condition of our experience so remarkable as to be without the reach of the ordinary application of mercy. Such a conclusion is an impeachment of the sufficiency of redemption, and an imputation against the veracity of the divine promises.

Yet before I dismiss this ground of complaint altogether, I shall not omit reprobating a practice which gives rise to it; and which is entirely inconsistent with a speedy attainment of our end: I mean the practice of *occupying the mind*

* Psalm. li. 10.

with speculations of what the future change is to be; the manner in which it is to be effected, and the particular sensations we shall undergo. This is a busy idleness which never does good, but invariably leads to some evil: And although considered innocent in itself, it has a direct tendency to defeat our purpose, as some employments, which appear to be of a more worldly nature. Indeed, the confusion of mind and thought which this practice produces, can hardly be too much deprecated. It keeps the Gospel out of view; or suffers only an occasional appearance of it, while its main and ultimate bearing is lost. The consequence, as well as the fact itself, may be seen in a moment's illustration:—Any object which we contemplate ought to affect us according to its nature: but that effect will be in proportion to the impression it makes upon us; and that impression, again, will depend upon the intentness and steadiness of attention to the object. Now, if we divide our attention, or suffer it to be engaged in analyzing the workings of mind, the employment is in opposition to the professed end we have in view. It is a mode of serious trifling which we exercise in no other matter. Let me suppose information of a very interest-

ing nature to have reached you: would it be possible to detect yourself in labouring to discover the manner in which it operates upon you—the particular analysis of your feelings? And would not any such abstruse reasoning completely supercede the happy effect of the intelligence? And so it is with respect to the offers of the Gospel. You believe that you are a lost sinner; and that the only method of salvation is to be found in the scheme of which Christ is the founder and revealer. But if your attention be diverted from this, surely no expectation of its efficacy upon you can be reasonably entertained. That at which you are looking is not the gospel; but something essentially different from it.

This indulgence in the play of imagination often introduces a most powerful temptation in the way; especially where previous habits insensibly lead to its exercise. There are those who live much of their time in regions of fancy; whose happiness is found in aerial matters and things; and who have always a resort from pain to pleasure, in their musings. In such a case as this, the evil which I am now condemning is to be very seriously deprecated, as a powerful means of destroying the effect of con-

viction: for while part of this precious period of his time is expended by the Inquirer in speculations on the anticipated change of his heart, he loses sight of the common center to which all his thoughts should be directed; and his sinfulness and danger vanish together from his sight. It is not merely a delay of the object avowedly sought, that is to be apprehended in this castle-building: Truth itself is sacrificed for that which is unreal.

But more: In this idle occupation of speculating on the future change, all surmises are sure to be wrong. Fancy can bear no resemblance to the fact as it is. The Scriptures leave us entirely in the dark as to the mode and manner of divine operations. They negative all our preconceived views, while we are watching to ascertain the progress of the renewal of soul. We do know that in this great work the Holy Spirit exerts his influence: but this is all we can discover; "whence it cometh, and whither it goeth" are known to God alone. There is a variety of questions here, which have occasioned much unnecessary discussion: whether this divine influence act previous to a distinct perception of the truth,—and thus afford a capability of such perception: or wheth-

er, while the mind is directed to the truth, this divine influence accompany or flow from it,—and thus render it effectual: whether a change is to be effected so imperceptibly that its particular developments can not be distinctly traced in their progress, or in our review; or whether some extraordinary excitement, overwhelming in its force, and memorable as the grand era of our life, ensue at once—all these are less than secondary matters with one who has no right to withhold a single moment from his God.

But speculations of this nature are not the only ones with which the mind may be occupied in this important period. The discursiveness of fancy is always apt to extend anticipation to other things. In the prospective career every thing is scrutinized. Future schemes and plans are formed: their influence and bearing examined: future habits, and the alteration they may produce upon our feelings and temporal interest, come before the eye.

There is one matter, in particular, which is very often prominent in the minds of those who are partially impressed: I mean that of *making a profession of religion*. So closely connected is this with the subject of religion itself, in the view of most, that when we have often spoken

privately on the danger of neglecting the soul, a very frequent reply is,—“ I am not fit to partake of the holy communion.” A reply which evades the point to which we wish the reflections directed. It is not an avowal of religion we are urging, at such a time; important as is the dying command of the Saviour, it is not likely to be neglected when the heart is surrendered to him:—but it is faith and repentance towards God—it is the hazard of the immortal spirit, to which we are calling the attention: and if we can fix it on them we have accomplished our end. And yet there is a waywardness which turns the eye from piety to its profession. In the Inquirer this is very observable. He knows that a public avowal of his faith would succeed his attainment of grace. It is an act of the deepest solemnity: and invested as it often is, by adventitious circumstances of awe in the mind, it is not unapt to engross his thoughts to the exclusion of what is more suited to his state. He believes, too, that such an act involves a vast amount of responsibility; and his mind ruminates on this with doubt and fearfulness. He forgets that no new obligations are implied, and no new duties are enjoined in this important transaction: for

every obligation, and every duty, which flow from an open espousal of the Redeemer's cause, were incumbent on us before: they do not arise from the act of consecrating ourselves, but from a previous divine command; and we are no more at liberty to cull for ourselves certain precepts and to reject others, than we are to abandon at will, the whole of the sacred decalogue. All this, however, is too readily forgotten.

Nay, his fears on this point are still more excited, from a further cause: As more is expected from a professor of religion than from the mere worldling,—in the ideas commonly entertained on this subject,—an additional source of apprehension appears before him, and perhaps completely supercedes the great object of inquiry. Let me bring to your notice an example in point, which now occurs to my memory. The heart of an acquaintance had been seriously affected; and favourable expectations were entertained of the issue. A single thought which frequently presented itself, ultimately checked his seriousness, and restored him more completely to the world than ever: He had been unsuccessful in mercantile engagements: And in the midst of his thoughtfulness, he of-

ten compared the consequences of declaring himself on the side of religion with this fact. "What will the world think of me,"—he would say,—“If I profess to be religious? It looks like a dishonourable covert from scrutiny. It will be imagined a design to gain the good will of others under a cloak of hypocrisy—an excuse from a possible reproach.” You can easily judge of the effect of such apprehensions upon a high-minded spirit, conscious of its integrity, and shrinking from the imputation of wrong. The consequences were as I have stated. A continual recurrence to this ground of fear diverted his attention from the state of his soul: and, at last, furnished a satisfactory excuse for postponing what conscience and the Word of God declared to be the duty of the present moment. You observe the insidiousness of all this reasoning. And you see how easily Satan may make an instrument of it to effect the purpose of diverting the soul from its eternal interest.

This practice of speculating on the future is not visible to an observer. Nor is it often indicated by the Inquirer himself; unless it be visible by some indirect hint; or discoverable by questions which such speculations induces him

to ask. It is, most usually, a secret employment which he would be ashamed to mention on his own part; and of which, possibly, he is not altogether conscious: and yet to which there is a natural tendency, during intervals when the mind is not more profitably exercised; and when this employment furnishes a partial relief to the anxiety of his feelings.

Leaving this, let me go back with you to another of the grounds of discouragement; which you have taken occasion to suggest: I mean "*the fear that God, for some unknown reason, is not willing to pardon you, however free his pardon and mercy may be to others.*" It would be unjust to say, that this complaint is always insincere. Yet it is often expressed in the petulance of the moment, without any serious conviction, and perhaps, without any strong suspicion of its truth and, in such case, it is not easy to measure the criminality of thus sporting with the divine promises. Or, it may be the conclusion of a mind suffering under deep depression, and expressing, it hardly knows what: a thoughtless vent of feeling, the fruit of selfishness. Or, it may arise from present disappointment. Or, it may be, as it very often is, the dictate of remorse.

But whatever its source, it always indicates a want of consideration, or ignorance of the plan of redemption. And not a few instances occur, in which it is utterly impossible to reason with the complainer: in which he seems to foster a melancholy belief against all the promises; and an indisposition to examine the means or conditions of salvation. And yet such a man might have been able to argue well against the unreasonableness of his own inferences in any one else. On the other hand, it is possible that the same truths, which he knows how to apply to a friend, but knows not how to appropriate to himself, might effectually reach him when they come from other lips. Or, it may be, that when they have failed at one time, they may be successful at another. So fitful and capricious is the state of the awakened sinner.

In some instances, the complaint of which I am speaking might be expressed in other words—"I do not see how the promises of God could be fulfilled in me"—the means of their accomplishment are not visible. Here is a character of unbelief somewhat resembling that of the Samaritan Lord, in days of old; who refused faith in a prediction because he could not see the means of its completion.

Because he could not decide whence succour could come, he discredited the pledge of its coming at all. And his infidelity ended in his own personal ruin; though the promise was redeemed. It is often thus with the sinner. Because he sees no hope in his own resources; and does not see how God can operate without them, he frequently perishes in his incredulity, within the very reach of salvation. Alas, unbelief of the divine promises is often the last sin of which we are conscious; and it may be committed at a time when we are least likely to be aware of doing so. A proud reasoning that contradicts the word of God, and gives the lie to the Holy One of Israel, may exist where we imagine a mere humble and humbling despondency.

You have already seen that it is inconsistent with the divine economy of grace to refuse the application of the Inquirer for the sole reason that he is not embraced within an elective decree: and the following remarks may serve to convince you that the exclamation so frequently heard from the desponding sinner,—“*my sins are too great to be forgiven,*”—is without any foundation in truth.

The most prominent trait in the atonement

of Jesus Christ is, that if it be sufficient to procure the pardon of a single sin, it is equally so to cover the most aggravated and complicated guilt. The salvation of a single soul required a sacrifice of infinite worth; and no number or extent of crimes can, therefore, be committed, to put the transgressor beyond the reach of its efficacy. The Scriptures always speak of its entire sufficiency; and refer the loss of the soul to its unbelief, or to a rejection of the conditions of grace. You have often remarked how they contrast the condition of a penitent Magdalen, and a mourning Publican, with that of the self-righteous Pharisee. And this position is finely exemplified after the Saviour's ascent, when his murderers stood convicted before Peter, and, sensible of the atrocity of their guilt, asked,—“Men and brethren, what shall we do?”—If ever there were an instance in which we might have doubted the salvation of the sinner, it was this. These men had witnessed the miracles of the Saviour—had seen successive evidences of his divine mission—had heard his heavenly instructions—had consented to his death, effected under perjured accusations—had taunted him with incompetency to save himself—and seemed to

have sealed their certain doom by the most awful imprecation that ever ascended to God,—"his blood be upon us and our children!" And yet the answer of the Apostle indicated no wavering in his own mind, respecting the possibility of their salvation—"repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ."—"Repent,—and by a public avowal manifested in baptism, take him to be your Saviour whom you treated with scorn, and of whose death yourselves are guilty."

And it deserves your consideration that the word of God, when it announces the efficacy of the Redeemer's blood, never annexes a proviso that the iniquity be not too great: On the contrary, it meets any doubt that could arise on this subject in the mind of the sinner, and anticipates all the fears it might possibly occasion, in language which can not be misunderstood. What a beautiful instance have we of this, in the message of God by the prophet Isaiah—"Come now and let us reason together: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." And then, lest fear should still be awakened, through a misapprehension of the Creator's character,

and the transgressor should find a plea against all hope, from the unrelenting temper of the deeply-injured party, God has left with us that most important admonition—"My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord: For as the Heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."*

And it is this very freeness and sufficiency of pardon, which, if duly considered, are so admirably adapted to melt the heart of the sinner, while they take away all possible excuse from the impenitent. If a doubt touching the fulness of salvation remained, and if he had reason to pause in order to settle the question whether he could be included in its offers, there would be some apology for his delay. But the simple reflection that nothing on the part of God can withhold the most abandoned sinner from mercy, ought to be a powerful means of contrition, while it should lead to an immediate surrender of the whole affections to Christ.

Is it not, then, adding unbelief to your former sins, to insist on your being an exception

* Is. lv. 8, 9.

to a universal rule? Is it not criminal to indulge in such awful fancies, in direct opposition to the declarations of the Gospel? Living in a world where the most guilty has been pardoned, the most ungodly has been sanctified, and the most miserable blessed, what folly to retain a doubt of the riches of grace! What wickedness thus to veil the glory of Jehovah, by making his thoughts and ways as ours, or by ascribing to him promises to whose performance he is not equal!—Let all discouraging surmises alone: Believe,—for God hath said it,—that nothing can exclude you from the benefit of the Redeemer's death but impenitence and unbelief on your own part. Oh it is distressing to see the convinced sinner pacing dejectedly around the promises of Christ; beholding their infinite worth; desiring to share in their participation; and yet, not only not approaching a step nearer to them, but listening to the idle vagaries of a spirit distressed, and canvassing the question whether *he* be not an exception to a rule which is otherwise evidently universal! Ah, my dear Sir, such sorrow as springs from this unbelief is only making work for deeper remorse. It is adding reproach to the reproach-

es which have already fallen on the Saviour. It is nurturing a feeling as likely to be destructive to your own best interests as it is dishonourable to him.

See, too, what a mischievous delusion is this under which you are now labouring. While you are brooding over this distress, and feeding the grief that preys upon your peace, you are disposed plaintively to ask, "why does God permit me to endure this sorrow?" And you do not see that the fault is your own: that it is a sorrow which "worketh death;" which is no part of the means of your salvation, or of your pardon.—You attempt to persuade yourself that there is no hope in your behalf, while you gather all your conclusions from a mere moodiness of feeling. And it is upon this criminal state you anticipate the pity and compassion of Jesus.

Believe me, a heart penetrated with a sense of its past ingratitude and guilt, and looking to the Saviour for his pardoning mercy, will never be spurned from the seat whence he dispenses it. Hie to the Cross. The Redeemer can never willingly afflict the penitent at the place where, incarnate, he suffered for the deliverance of his sinful creatures from

sorrow and death. There maintain a resolution to stay. And if the dread of perishing ever steal over you, encourage yourself with the simple language of the poet,

“But should I die with mercy sought,
When I the King have tried,
I there should die, (reviving thought!)
Where ne’er a sinner died.”

But if, on the contrary, you nourish apprehensions, which the whole tenor of Scripture concurs in reproofing; if “wearied with the greatness of your way,” you continue to murmur and repine, the whole consequences and guilt are incurred by your own personal means.

Farewell!

I am, as ever, yours, &c.

LETTER VI.

Our propension to extremes—The Unpardonable sin—Explanation of passages relating to it—An example of the danger of error on this subject.

MY DEAR SIR,

HAS it ever occurred to you how sadly we are prone to extremes in the matters of eternal interest? While we are yet unimpressed with a sense of our condition, we are not only willing to admit the extent of divine mercy, and the sufficiency of pardon, but we are even disposed to believe them ready at our beck; and, not unfrequently, secretly to fancy our salvation almost necessary to the happiness of our Maker. We merge all his attributes into that fictitious quality,—unconditional pity; while we consider its very times and seasons in our own hands. How easily we then overlook every perplexity which can accompany the Inquirer, and imagine the space between our mere wish and its object, so short and practicable that all present anxiety is superfluous. But how the scene shifts when we obtain some little insight into the nature of our own hearts!

The divine compassion which appeared so accessible, and perhaps so venal, gives place to the scrutiny and exactions of justice.—Where now is the belief which we had so covertly cherished of a Heavenly interest in our favour? Where is the persuasion founded on we know not what,—that *we* were safe whatever became of others? They have given way to a conviction nearly as strong—that we are precluded from hope. With such facility do we make the transition from presumption to despair! Our late petty excuses for a neglect of religion, and all those miserable subterfuges to which we love to resort, give place to new cares—arising from mistakes in the character of God, or from misconstrued expressions in his holy Word.

Extremes meet. Either presumption or despair may keep the sinner back from salvation; and while it is not easy to say which of them is the more offensive in the sight of God, we know that either may be cherished without reflecting, at the time, on its moral tendency. Thus, the Inquirer may see his past security in its true light, while he is sensible of no guilt in questioning, as he now does, the promises of his Maker; or in limiting the be-

nevolence of Christ. So difficult is it to keep in sight the sin which now besets us; and so much more prominent are other sins than our own!

Besides, I have often thought that there is a tendency in the anxious mind to seize on whatever can add to its perplexity; as a diseased appetite longs for what would have been loathed in a state of healthfulness. And it is by this tendency we account for cares which ought never to harass the awakened sinner; and for contradictions inconsistent with a proper approach to Him who is "the way, and the truth, and the life."

Among these subjects of distress it is not wonderful that the apprehension of having committed the *Unpardonable Sin* is often included.—When the Inquirer can not discover the causes of his failure, and has been occupying his attention with something extraneous, he very easily fancies that some secret and mysterious cause is operating against him. And, especially, when he reads that there is a "*sin unto death*,"—a transgression which can never be forgiven,—he is not unlikely to appropriate to himself, all the horrors and guilt of that terrible evil. If he

be not able to recal to mind any act of peculiar atrocity into which he has been led, or any outrageous expression against the authority of Heaven, he can, perhaps, remember when he strove against the convictions of his mind, and very possibly did despite unto the Holy Ghost. Or, it may be, that without conviction himself, he attributed the work of God, in other minds, to some unhallowed cause; and now recollects his mistake with all the bitterness of remorseful feeling, and all the terrors of a visible doom. Or, if neither of these be visible in his past experience and conduct, he suspects that in some ill-fated hour he may have sinned beyond the hope of mercy, and unconsciously incurred the penalty of irremissible guilt. In a state of mind agitated by such fears, he is not likely to review the past, with all the deliberation the occasion demands, or to put a fair construction on the difficulties into which he is led. And the very anxiety which his fears have created, is often attributed to the dire transgression which he imagines himself to have committed; or more immediately to the spiritual desolation which is supposed to have followed it.

When we add to this the superstitious dread

which often accompanies the mention of this deed of darkness, and which has been increased by public accounts of certain memorable examples, or by instances that are said to have occurred within the memory of some around us, it is not wonderful that suspicion should almost grow into proof. Nor should I be surprised if, in cases where such terrible forebodings have sometimes engrossed the mind, and no relief had been furnished to the despondency they occasioned, a dying bed has sometimes disclosed an awful scene of despair: And the evil which existed in the imagination alone, has effectually precluded all effort to obtain the pardon of God: just as an imaginary disease has as effectually terminated in death, as a disorder that is real and local. But although despair in a death hour may be part of the effects of a sinful life, it is unfair to attribute it to a cause with which it may have no immediate connexion.

To allow yourself to be disturbed by vague and indefinite apprehensions is never wise. But to permit them to keep you back from the tendered mercy of God is both folly and sin. Before you suffer, then, any conclusion against yourself, carefully travel over your ground,

and at least understand the premises which lead to so sad an issue. Now, are you perfectly assured what the unpardonable sin is? If not, any inference against yourself has been taken from the obstacles in your way—from the state of your own mind. And whatever this may be, it can present no effectual bar to your salvation. But are you aware that there is not a single question, within the circle of theological discussion, which has led to such a variety of opinions, as the one before us? It is a singular fact that we can enumerate not less than *thirty-two*. And it is not unlikely that, on future inquiry, others might be found as injudicious as any among this number. As it may tend to show you how much uncertainty is connected with the whole question, let me select a portion from the mass of opinions:

“Villifying the Holy Ghost:”*—“The denial of God in Christ:”†—“An unmeet expression of the Spirit:”‡—“Final impenitence:”||—“The blasphemy of infidelity:”§—“Sinning maliciously against the truth:”¶—“Universal apostacy from God, by which the majesty of God is maliciously opposed:”**—

* Epiphanius. † Hillary. ‡ Cyril. || Augustin. § Ambrose.
¶ Lyra. ** Beza.

“Opposition to the Word of God while convinced of its divine authority:”*—“Blasphemy in the face of miracles:”†—These are the opinions of older writers. Modern authors are less divided: but still differ much on the subject. Some have contended that a rare combination of circumstances is required in the commission of this sin. Others insist that, in the present day, it is not possible to be guilty of it under any circumstances. While a few have held up the texts which are supposed to refer to it, as matters of awful warning.

Some tell us that the Unpardonable Sin is a denial of Christ under oath,—a crime to which persecution exposed many in the early ages of the church. But if this were so, the Apostle Peter must have been guilty of it; for he “began to curse and swear, saying, I know not the man.” And there is reason to believe that the guilt of many impenitent sinners is still more aggravated, in their bold enmity to God, and in giving utterance to language daring as that of the perjured disciple.

Some would solve the difficulty by a supposititious case: “If the two characters, and the different sins, of Peter and Paul were united

* Musculus, Calvin, Bucer, and Piscator. † Chrysostom.

in one person, this unpardonable guilt would be incurred.”* But this supposition is fanciful in the extreme: A moment’s thought will convince us that no such man exists.

Other critics have contended that from the nature of the Hebrew idiom, in the Gospel of Matthew, we are to understand that the crime in question is not absolutely unpardonable; but only comparatively so, when viewed in connexion with others. And that no other construction than this would be consistent with our Lord’s praying for his enemies on the Cross.†

But let us proceed to a cursory examination of those texts which have occasioned the perplexity we are considering. The first occurs in Matthew‡—“I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men; but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come.” You will remember that our Saviour had just exercised his miraculous

* Reynolds. † See Waterland’s Sermon on Math. xii. 31, 32.

‡ xii. 31, 32.

power in the cure of a demoniac. The Pharisees saw that this proof of special and divine authority could not be contravened. Foiled, then, in their efforts, they attempted to destroy the credit of the miracle, by imputing the whole agency to Satan. It was in this their criminality seems to have consisted; as another Evangelist tells us—"because the Pharisees said he hath an unclean spirit." The doctrines and work of the Holy Ghost were not only rejected, but maliciously calumniated, and imputed to the Prince of Darkness.

Now it is somewhat questionable how near any sin committed at the present day, can approach to this. It is certain that malicious opposition to the miracles of the Holy Ghost can not be exhibited; for no such testimony of divine power is now visible. And with respect to the spirit of the threat itself, the exposition of some other texts, before I close this Letter, may, perhaps, throw some light on it.

The next passage under consideration is found in the Epistle to the Hebrews.*—"For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened and have tasted of the Heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost,

* vi. 4, 5, 6.

and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame." We should examine these expressions separately:

The persons alluded to were "*once enlightened.*" Life and immortality being brought to light, all who had received knowledge of the truth were called "*enlightened*" in distinction from the moral darkness of Heathenism. But this illumination, although it might bring some hope to the mind, is not to be confounded with the sanctifying and saving influence of the spirit—the only true hope of the soul. "*Have tasted of the Heavenly gift*"—The term "*gift*" here, refers to the new Gospel state. And "*tasting*" implies so far an examination of it as to induce a conviction that it was a more excellent state than that in which the subject had been, while a Pagan or a Jew. A very similar meaning should be attached to "*the good Word of God.*" Being made "*partakers of the Holy Ghost*" is understood by our best expounders, to apply to the pos-

* Heb. x. 26, 27.

session of those spiritual gifts which were sometimes conferred, in the Apostolic age, even on those who had only an historical or speculative faith:—among which were included the gifts of tongues and prophecy. “*The powers of the world to come,*” meant the miracles performed under the Gospel dispensation; which had always been denominated “the age, or world, to come.”

Before we examine the remainder of this passage, let me introduce another of similar import: “If we sin wilfully after we receive the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking-for of judgment.”* It will assist us in our attempt to understand both these quotations, if we recollect that they were addressed to persons supposed to be familiar with the Law of Moses. In that dispensation, you will recollect that there were certain sins for which no provision was made by sacrifice;—especially presumptuous transgressions; with respect to which God had said, immediately after giving the regulations concerning sacrifices,—“But the soul that doth ought presumptuously, whether he be born in the land, or a

* Heb. x. 26, 27.

stranger, the same reproacheth the Lord; and that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Because he hath despised the Word of the Lord; and hath broken his commandment, that soul shall utterly be cut off; his iniquity shall be upon him.”* Or in regard to open idolatry; of which it had been said,—“If there be found among you, within any of thy gates which the Lord thy God giveth thee, man or woman, that hath wrought wickedness in the sight of the Lord thy God, in transgressing his covenant, and hath gone and served other Gods and worshipped them, &c.”† The punishment in all such cases was death, by law. But are we hence to conclude that there could be no remission of sin in any case for which no sacrifice had been legally provided?—Surely not. Numerous transgressions were pardoned through the sacrifice of Christ, then remaining to be offered. You have examples of this in Aaron, David, and Manasseh; for some of whose sins there was no sacrifice appointed by law. It is in reference to this the Apostle speaks, when he says of those who reject the atonement of Jesus Christ, that “there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins.” His

* Numb. xv. 30, 31. † Deuteronomy, xvii. 2—7.

meaning seems to be, that as there can be no salvation out of Christ, they must perish who persist in refusing this. But then such is neither more nor less than a case of final impenitence. And it is only as such the awakened sinner ought now to view it.

There is another consideration which should always be kept in mind in reading the awful threatenings of God,—and that, too, when they appear, at first sight, entirely absolute: I mean, that all these threatenings are *conditional*. The declaration of Joshua to the children of Israel would seem appalling,—“Ye can not serve the Lord, for he is an holy God; he is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins.” Yet the Patriarch certainly could not have intended to declare that there was no possible pardon for their sins, if they sought it in a penitent and becoming manner. The same limitation must be preserved in reading the address of Moses, when he says of Jehovah—“Beware of him, and obey his voice, provoke him not, for he will not pardon your transgressions.”

It is true, My Dear Sir, that the language of Scripture, respecting apostates, assumes a peculiar awfulness: And it is indeed a melan-

choly thought that few of them ever reach repentance. And yet I would not dare conclude that their case is always hopeless. We have reason to trust otherwise even for this wretched and apparently abandoned class, in certain instances. The Apostle Paul, in his instructions to Timothy, plainly refers to them; where, after speaking of Hymenæus and Philetus, who had deserted the truth, although they still retained the name of Christianity, he says,—*If God peradventure will give them repentance.*”* Indeed of the former of these persons, and of another of the same description, the Apostle had said that he had “delivered them unto Satan;” or, as the expression implies, had banished them from the Visible Church; and that, not as a matter of mere vengeance; but in order that “they might learn not to blaspheme”—or, that they might be led to repentance.

The last text which we will examine on this subject, and which seems less equivocal than either of the preceding, and has, perhaps, a more formidable aspect than any other in the Bible, is that of the Apostle John:†—“If any

* See the whole of this example—2 Timothy, Chap. ii. 17, 18—24, 25.

† John, v. 16.

man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it." There is something so terrific in the language, "*I do not say that he shall pray for it,*" that it has often fore-gathered the despair of an impenitent and remorseful dying hour. We almost fancy before us the wretched subject, singled out by a judicial hand: the frost of the second death chilling all possible hope in his behalf: and even the Christian bidden to look with mute astonishment on the abandoned reprobate. All this appears to be the consequence of a construction very commonly put upon the language before us. And how many impolitic measures has it sometimes occasioned! To what ill-advised and rash conclusions has it led, in the minds of some who mistook an active opposition to the cause of Christ for this nameless and desperate crime!

Let me place before you the three or four of the most plausible interpretations of this extraordinary passage. The first is, that it is intended as a general direction relative to the subjects of prayer—that we are bound to offer up our petitions for all, excepting those who

have committed the Unpardonable Sin. But this construction supposes the ordinary Christian always to know when the Unpardonable Sin has been committed; which is absurd. And if it be said that the application is only to those who possess the gift of discerning spirits, then it would favour the inference that this sin could have been committed only in the early ages of the Church; or else the direction, if applicable at the present time, should have been accompanied by some obvious sign by which it might be distinguished.

Another interpretation is,—“any transgression obstinately persevered in; and which, of course, not being repented of, must end in the eternal death of the guilty. This impenitence being known to the ancient Christian, from the simple fact that he was not moved by the Holy Ghost to pray for it, he conceived himself forbidden to hope for pardon in behalf of the sinner.” But the truth is, we are no where encouraged to ask for the remission of unrepented guilt, either for ourselves or others. The utmost we can do, is to entreat that repentance may be given; and all the rest will then be well. Yet, if the above interpretation were

admissible, you could have no personal interest in the case.

Others suppose that the transgressor having been one who made a public avowal of his faith in Christianity, and thus standing within the pale of the Visible Church, evinced, by his unholy life, that his profession was hypocritical; and, that, accordingly, the Christian was not to regard him in the light of a brother, or pray for him, as such: because he could not plead any of the promises in his behalf. I have only to say that this construction seems to be rather constrained. And yet if it were just, it furnishes an example of no possible application to the awakened sinner.

The last interpretation I will mention, is the one which seems to me most consistent with the other portions of Scripture, already cited:

You are aware that the primitive Church was guarded with peculiar care from the encroachments of vice; and it was this which so effectually secured its stability and extension. As one means of completing this end, the more flagrant violations of law were punished with visible, and often severe, temporal judgments. It was hence the Apostle said to the Corinthians, who had been guilty of most criminal

irregularities in the ordinance of the Lord's Supper—"For this cause many are weak and sickly among you and many sleep"—or, are dead. But as the gift of healing was conferred on some of these early Christians, it was used in behalf of such as had repented of the sins which brought on the malady. And it is to this the Apostle James refers, in a similar case.* I should find very little hesitation, in my own mind, in concluding that such is the reference in this contested verse. In that case, the restriction of prayer related only to the diseases in question; and not in the least to the spiritual condition of the sufferer.

I am very confident that the Word of God, in all its general representations of character, considers the sinner, while in this world, within the range of Divine mercy. If there ever have been any particular exceptions, it must have been those who, in the Apostolic age, after being privileged with extraordinary light, and gifted perhaps with miraculous power, turned traitors to the faith, and openly blasphemed the Holy Ghost. And this restriction of prayer was not unlike that of the prophet Jeremiah, in an earlier period of the Church;

* v. 14, 15.

when he was forbidden to ask a reversal of the sentence to captivity, and yet, at the same time, continued to admonish the people, and to pray for their salvation.*

It should be admitted,—and the melancholy truth reveals an alarming admonition—that all, or any, opposition to Divine Grace, has a tendency to accomplish its own work of ruin in the soul of the opposer. And it is not easy for us to say how far this tendency may be accompanied by the spiritual judgments of God. But one thing on this subject is very certain:—No one who has ever sinned beyond the possibility of remission, is painfully convinced of having done so, and yet still lives under the opportunities of the Gospel. A seared conscience and an impenitent mind must invariably attend the fate of the reprobate. The presages of this fate,—if any occurred at all,—would be faint and few. His calm would be unbroken. A fearful silence of all warning would suffer him to slumber on; and the hour of his awakening would be in the light of Eternity.

An instance of the distressing effects of fear, on this subject, which now occurs to me, may not be out of place. It is one of the many

* Compare Jer. vii. 14—16 with Micah., vii. 8, 9—19, 20.

which may tend to show the consequences of error on a susceptible mind: Mr. L. had enjoyed the privilege of sitting under an able and successful ministry. His heart had been touched. And during a remarkable period, in which he saw many of his friends embracing the hope of salvation, his own convictions increased. Not long after, his feelings of impatience became sensitive. His attention was, subsequently, turned from its own proper object, to one more nearly connected with our natural selfishness. He ceased to be an Inquirer, and became an objector. It is hard to stop here. Opposition succeeded a habit of objecting. And apparent bitterness of prejudice and malevolence of expression, were observable whenever he opened his lips on the subject of religion. Still the past day of conviction was a memorable time to him. Five years afterwards, he was again aroused to a sense of his danger. And with the alarm came the frightful recollection of his former conduct. Language which he had uttered,—and which appeared nearly allied to blasphemy,—returned fresh to his memory. He accused himself of having committed the Unpardonable Sin. All efforts to persuade him to the contrary

were unavailing. The impression was daily deepening. His mind lost its elasticity; and a moody temperament succeeded. His friends were alarmed. A suspicion was started among them, that his conclusions might be just. This he marked, and laboured to confirm it. He seemed,—I know not how,—to take a negative satisfaction in stating the desperation of his case; and in watching the fallen countenance of sympathy.

Many months had transpired, during which he was the subject of religious gossip with some,—of a kind of superstitious dread with others,—and of fervent prayer with a few of the remainder;—when the case was stated to a judicious Minister, whom some Providence had called into the neighbourhood. He waited on Mr. L., who, far from being averse to any conversation relative to his own state, seemed rather to court it. He was fluent in all the details of time and circumstance; and always ended his narrative with the declaration that he had ceased forever to pray. After a preparatory interchange of remarks, he was asked—“You believe yourself guilty of the Unpardonable Sin?”

“I am sure of it.”

“In what did the crime consist?”

“I opposed the work of God.”

“So did Saul.”

“I denied Jesus Christ.”

“So did a Disciple afterwards honoured by his Master.

“I doubted the power of Jesus Christ, after strong evidences in its favour.”

“So did Thomas.”

“What! are you attempting to prove by such examples that I am a Christian?”

“Not at all: I am only inquiring into the nature of your guilt; and thus far I see no reason for despair.”

“I have hated God,”—rejoined the self-condemned,—“and openly avowed my enmity in sight of his Divine operations.”

“Thus far your case is lamentable indeed; but not hopeless still. Our hearts are naturally at enmity with God. And I do not see why the open avowal of this, drawn out by the sight of the Law, into visible form, must necessarily and always constitute the guilt of which you accuse yourself.”

“*I feel* that I am cut off from salvation.”

“It is difficult to reason against your feelings. But they are no proof on the present sub-

ject. Let me inquire whether you desire the pardon of your sins?"

"Assuredly; if it were possible."

"Do you regret the conduct of which you accuse yourself?"

"Certainly."

"Do you sincerely desire repentance?"

"I would give the world, if it were mine, to be able to do so."

"Then it is not possible that you have been guilty to an unpardonable extent: for these are characteristics of a state of mind faithless, but far from being desperate. And they come within the design of the Gospel invitations."

There was something simple and touching in this mode of ministering to a mind diseased. And it produced an effect which, probably, no other process, could have accomplished. Mr. L. did not long survive this interview. But his living and dying hours were those of a favoured Christian.

It is, perhaps, hardly fair to speculate on contingencies in such a case as this. But, humanly speaking, had Mr. L. been removed from time, without such providential interference, it would have been with the melancholy convic-

tion in his own, and other minds, that he had been guilty of this fearful evil. And yet, had he gone down without hope to the grave, final unbelief and impenitence would have been the ground of his condemnation, and not the guilt of the Unpardonable Sin.

Let me pray you, My Dear Sir, to dismiss this whole subject, as one with which, at this time, particularly, you have nothing to do. There is enough before you to engross all your solicitude, without seeking subjects of unnecessary anxiety.

Adieu.

I am very truly, &c.



LETTER VII.

The disposition to discouragement—Discouraging texts in the Bible—An explanation of Luke, xiii. 24—Prov. i. 28.—Hebrew, xii. 17—Hosea, iv. 17.

MY DEAR SIR,

I would not say that it is always perverse ness in the disposition of the Inquirer, which leads him to misapply the language of the Scrip-

tures; although there might be some truth in a general charge of this nature. The timidity which the importance of the subject in which he is engaged, may produce in his mind, will easily awaken unhappy suspicions against himself. And they may be led into activity by any thing which wears the semblance of discouragement. This is the natural effect upon a temper whose bias is sorrowful; and which is so much more readily attracted by difficulties than by the simplicity of the Gospel. Especially when we recollect, as I have already intimated, how prone is such a mind to look for the causes of its perplexity out of itself, and to fancy their existence where there could be no possible reason for fear. An accusing conscience is not only distrustful, but is a skilful artificer of its sorrow.

Some of the Scriptural passages which you have noted, are certainly adapted to awaken the inconsiderate, and to promote in us all a diligence to make our calling and election sure.— But not one of them was designed to thwart the purpose of the sincere Inquirer; or to render more precarious the confidence he is bound to repose in the Saviour. For proof of this position let us look into the meaning of some of those

passage which are usually considered discouraging. And we will begin with that in the thirteenth chapter of Luke: "*Strive to enter in at the straight gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able.*"

The difficulty which this text presents, arises from disconnecting it with the subsequent verse: And hence it is concluded that all who apply, sincerely, for salvation, will not be embraced in the number of the saved. According to this interpretation, the Redeemer's argument in favour of diligence, is drawn from the frequent failure of effort in the Awakened Sinner. A failure which, it is supposed, is attributed to a defect in the manner of seeking, or to a want of perseverance and engagedness in that duty.

Now it is perfectly true that inactivity is wholly inconsistent with success: that fundamentally mistaken notions are equally so: and that he who asks for pardon and mercy, without, in some measure, feeling the importance of the boon he solicits, will ask in vain. The word in this passage which we translate "*strive,*" is a strong figure of speech, importing all that ardour and resolution which distinguish the successful antagonist, on the arena,

or the victorious soldier, on the field of battle. And it intimates that the “*straight gate*” is surrounded by powerful foes, through whom he is to contend his way. It gives the reason of failure in many who set out with apparent sincerity. But while it does all this, it pre-judges the fate of no awakened and penitent sinner.

Had the Saviour meant that persons of the same degree of sincerity might fail or succeed; and that the Sovereignty of God, independent of the desires and exertions of the applicant,—or his faith or repentance—would decide the question of success, this would not only have been inconsistent with Scripture—not only discouraging in the extreme—but remote from the purpose which he seems to have had, at that time, before him. He was not speaking of a change of heart, or the beginning of a new life. This had been his subject, on a former occasion,* when the expression “*straight gate*” referred to the commencement of the Christian career. But that occasion is not to be confounded, either in its time or circumstances, with the present, in which the same term

* Matthew, vii. 13.

has reference to the end of life—*the entrance into Heaven.*

The present passage refers to a marriage festival, according to the splendid manner and numerous attendance by which it was distinguished in Eastern custom: and during which the wicket, or narrow gate, alone was left open, that the crowd might not intrude, and that none but invited or accepted guests might enter. In such ceremonies, after a given hour, the door was shut, and all ingress was impracticable.

You will observe, then, that there is nothing here in the language of Jesus Christ intimating that any who come unto him will be cast out. But if a love of the world keep the sinner from the terms of grace, and he is rejected accordingly, the fault is entirely his own; while the justice of God will be vindicated in his condemnation at *the last day*. And that, too, although the excluded sinner may have worn the badge of a profession, and enjoyed all the privileges of light and knowledge.

That passage in Proverbs which you quote—
“*Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but*

they shall not find me,”* is less disheartening than you imagine! The whole sentence contains a solemn warning to those who are averse to the knowledge of their natural condition—the great mark of the unregenerate—and who practically despise the overtures of divine mercy. But then, that warning is taken from the final desolation of the impenitent; and not from God’s manner of dealing in the present world. The word “*early*,” which obscures the sense, should be exchanged for “*earnestly*”—a translation which conveys a more consistent meaning.

Your next quotation deserves more particular notice; not because it really contains any very serious difficulty in itself, but because the mischievous impressions which a misunderstanding of it has sometimes left, are deep and distressing—“*Let there be any—profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birth-right. For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.*”

There is something truly terrifying in the

* Prov. i. 23.

idea of a person deeply regretting his past misconduct, labouring to repent of the evil, but utterly unable to affect his mind with a proper sense of it. And this picture is the more distressing when accompanied with the conviction of having forfeited all hope of salvation, for some petty present gain; having bartered eternal life, for a momentary gratification, without the possibility of revoking the contract: and that, too, when the folly had been the impulse of passion; or, still more excusable, occasioned by the cravings of hunger. It is this representation which often appears before the mind of the alarmed sinner, in the passage cited, and attaches an arbitrary precariousness to the salvation of the soul. And if, in addition to this, the dealings of God towards him, had been distinguished in his providences, in times that are past, a comparison with the case of Esau is easily instituted, and the most poignant reflections are gathered from it. He can possibly recollect when he had been penetrated with a feeling sense of his lost condition: when, for a season, the importance of religion had occupied and engrossed his thoughts. He can recollect, too, how he abandoned the inquiry under the influence of worldly considerations; or,

it might have been, for some short-lived pleasure. Desirous as he may now be to renew those impressions, he finds it not possible to recall the same class of feelings. And sensible as he may be, of guilt and ill-desert, he bitterly laments his inability to reach a state of mind, which he considers irrecoverably lost. He fancies himself unable to “find place of repentance, though sought carefully with tears.” And he sees in Esau, an instance so closely resembling his own, that hope dies within him as he contemplates it; and he believes the only alternative now before him to be a return to the world, or a fruitless brooding over his lost condition:—a sad choice of evils, either of which must be fatal to his eternal happiness.

That it is possible to “*seek a place of repentance carefully with tears,*” without being ever able to comply with the primary condition of salvation, supposes that irremediable state which distinguishes none but the lost. And yet an apprehension of such a state has more than once, to my own knowledge, been wrought in the mind of the sinner, by the text we are now considering. Nor is it surprising that it should be so when we recollect the lively and pointed manner in which the language

would seem to describe the past and the present state of the backslider.

The simple truth, however, is, that the verses before us, have no relation whatever to the state of the Inquirer: and it is a tincture of melancholy which gives them an aspect not properly theirs.

The Apostle is here addressing professing Christians: and he presents an example of the danger of departing from the truth as it is in Jesus; and of exchanging the high privileges of the faithful, for the temporary advantages of the world. A *profane* person is properly one who lightly esteems, or despises sacred things. Such was Esau. His birthright, which, according to the economy in which he lived, held peculiar religious honours—not to add its pecuniary emolument—he bartered for a brief present indulgence. No excuse could palliate this conduct: for it evidently implied a very slight value set upon the privilege. Now, of what was it he repented?—of his gross sin in the sight of God? Not at all. He regretted his folly: and sought place of repentance *in his father's mind*; or in other words, he sought a reversal of his father's decision respecting the blessing: and that not immediately; but forty

years after the transaction was over. And this unavailing regret was not only such from the late hour in which it occurred—during the whole interval to which he had continued impenitent—and from the irrevocable investiture of the blessing in another,—but it was unavailing from its very nature. All his vehemency and tears arose from considerations completely selfish, and inconsistent with sincere penitence of heart. He sought nothing from his offended God; while, at the same time, he retained a feeling of rancour towards his brother. Besides—it was the pique of pride—the wounding of ambition—under which he smarted. The object of his desire was nothing spiritual: it was, to have that clause transferred to himself —“be Lord over thy brethren, and let thy mother’s sons bow down to thee.” Had he, before God, sought repentance in his own heart, and earnestly desired the special blessings of salvation, there was nothing to prevent his obtaining them.

In all this you see there is no parallel with the case of the Awakened Sinner. The circumstances, the object sought, the kind of repentance desired—as the Apostle applies them,—give an admonition to the members of the Vi-

sible Church, by a very plain inference; but they present no discouragement to the Inquirer. And if they furnish any lesson to sinners in general, it is, indirectly, the hazard of delay, or, the great importance of improving the present moment.

Let me now say that any uneasiness you have entertained on this subject, should lead you to reflect on the necessity and duty of taking every passage of Scripture in connexion with its broad and general truths. The Word of God will illustrate, but never contradict, itself. A detached sentence may fill the heart with terror, when it never was intended to do so. But carry it to the light of some other truth, and you will see that there is nothing to deter, but every thing to encourage the returning sinner.

You again adduce the language of Jehovah —“*Ephraim is joined to idols,—let him alone*”^{*}—as an evidence that some may be without the inclosure of hope, notwithstanding any desire, on their part, to return to God. But surely, he who is “*joined to his idols*”—who is obstinately bent on pursuits and plea-

^{*} Hosea, iv. 17.

surely dishonorable to God, and inimical to spirituality, can have no sincere desire in this behalf.

Moreover, if these words were designed to indicate to an idolatrous people, that their doom was now sealed, and that no more effort should be made for their good, the curse would have carried its own sign along with it—a cessation on the part of God to break in on their insensibility. But the Prophet continues to expostulate with pathos and earnestness—“Oh Israel, return unto the Lord thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity. Take with you words, and return unto the Lord: say unto him, take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously.”*

All this pleading is certainly inconsistent with the idea of a state of abandoned hopelessness. It announces the unretracted offer of pardon, on condition of repentance.

The admonition in the quoted passage, then, was not intended to intimate that the doom of this people was sealed. Nor was it a prohibition to the Ministers of the Sanctuary from preaching to this rebellious race; or they would have obeyed it. The whole history,

* Hosea, xiv. 1, 2.

and the connexion of the text, plainly show that the sentence was an order to Judah, to refrain from all unnecessary commerce with idolatrous Ephraim: "Let them alone. Though Israel sin, yet let not Judah offend." It implied the danger arising from evil communication, and particular communication with those guilty of so infectious a sin as that of idolatry. It was the application of a maxim of daily use.

That God may, and sometimes does, leave men to a perverse temper, and a hardened mind, is a truth, which, however painful it may be, is too plain to be denied. But the Awakened Sinner is in a situation directly the reverse of this. His sense of danger is neither accidental nor nugatory. The Holy Spirit has appealed to him: And that appeal has startled him. In doing this, it could hardly be the intention of the Creator to remind him of his doom only to leave him to wretchedness. In a case of utter hopelessness, that deep slumber of all susceptibility, which is so portentous to the observer, would be unnoted in the mind of the subject himself, while it would prevent any discovery of his condition.

And yet this doom does not consist in the infliction of any positive evil on the part of

God; nor may it be in the withdrawal of the means of grace. For if the lost soul could, as I have elsewhere said, ascribe his perdition exclusively to an absolute divine determination, his sufferings would be mitigated, if not removed. But the very reverse of this—the consciousness of his personal guilt—will be the means of promoting his endless wretchedness.

The only proof that any one is in a hopeless condition, must consist in his perverse continuance in unbelief and impenitence. As long as he so remains, there is every reason for apprehension; and the more so, in proportion to the length of time, and the extent of his privileges. Should he die in this state, we have the assurance of his ruin. But the moment we have evidence of his awakening to a sense of sin, and repenting of it, our grounds of alarm are removed. And he may be satisfied that God is fully as willing to accept of him as of any sinner on earth. It is our duty to take warning from the fact that thousands die with a seared conscience, to whom in life, every opportunity was offered. But if it be our own earnest desire to escape such a doom as justice dispenses to them, and if we adopt

the means, under God, of doing so, we may dismiss all fears of being included among their number: fully assured, as we should be, that the loss of the soul must be a fault of our own.

Once more, My Dear Sir, let me beseech you to cease harassing yourself with imaginary difficulties. Say no more with the sorrowing women who were seeking their Lord—"who shall roll us away the stone?"—The stone is already gone. No impediment is in our way to salvation, but such as we place there ourselves. The fountain of mercy is unlocked: and the path to it is as open and plain as infinite love can make it.

When you take up the Holy Volume, see that you do not render it "a snare and a trap." Let no apparent inconsistency startle you. Remember that you are not called on to reconcile its declarations, but to believe them. Once admitted into your heart, they will reconcile themselves. "Be not afraid, only believe," is the language of the blessed Redeemer himself.

I am yours, &c.

LETTER VIII.

Perplexity of reading the word of God—Complaint of the want of personal application—Natural aversion to the Bible—Mistaken expectations—An impious practice—Failure arising from listlessness in reading—Want of consideration—Forgetting that God is the author—Looking for an extraneous something—How the Spirit imparts the right meaning—Duty of becoming familiar with the Plan of Salvation—Caution relative to reading other books—Concluding advice.

MY DEAR SIR,

One of your expressions merits particular notice: “*Although I am confident that the Bible is the Word of God, and that it is the ordinary means, in his hands, of relieving the spiritual wants of his Creatures, yet it appears not of the least avail to me. It meets none of my difficulties. It presents no personal application to my own mind. There is in it nothing that is suitable to my exigencies. I have thought a thousand times, that I should rejoice to see a plain delineation of myself; something in a tangible form, to fix and rivet my attention. It is of the reverse of all this I complain. Every thing appears confused and indefinite, as it regards my own situation.* In

some portions of this Book, I can discover beauties which my judgment approves; and I can take some little interest in its Historical records. But although I task myself, in hopes of some development, or some discovery not yet made, I shut it again and again, as much in the dark as ever."

Sad complaint of a soul distressed with a sense of its loneliness, and sighing for an object suited to its necessities! And what a disappointment does it indicate! To how many murmurs does it give rise! How often does it create a wish that the Bible were not what it is!—But where is the fault? Certainly not in the book itself; but in the mind of the reader. And, in evidence of this, we might mention the different impressions which may be made on the same mind, at different times, and under different circumstances. The Scriptures are not always the same to the Christian himself. In seasons of coldness their energy and interest are, in a great measure, lost. Conviction of their intrinsic value, and individual reference, will indeed continue. But it is conviction from past, not from present experience. And even in the mind destitute of

any spiritual taste, the effect left by a perusal of the sacred pages may, and does, vary, both in degree and character. The same may be asserted of any piece of intelligence, which shall be of equal value to ten persons, to whom it is communicated, and yet the effect shall not be precisely the same upon any two of them.

It must be admitted as an universal truth, that the natural understanding can have no relish for the spiritualities of the Gospel. A man of this description would not only entertain some repugnance to its phraseology, or the singularity of its diction—a fault, if it be such, which arose from the state of the age in which our translation was made, as well as from a subject without analogy—but he would regard it as something so mystical in its character, and so different from his natural ideas of religion, as to produce an aversion which he may often find it difficult to repress. Habit and education may, in certain cases, and to a certain degree, qualify this repugnance. And a sense of duty, or a negative kind of veneration for what is divine, might carry the effect somewhat further. Yet without an acquired taste for spiritual things, there can be none of those peaceful feelings which are the

legitimate fruits of the Holy Word in the renewed soul.

But admitted as all this may be, on the part of the Inquirer, it furnishes no solution to his most pressing questions. ‘If he can not enter with all that freedom into the comforts of the Gospel, so fully avowed by the growing Christian: if there be no delight for him in pondering the testimonies of God—why does he not find something suited to his own case, in a Revelation expressly intended to be universal—something adapted to relieve an anxiety its own truths have occasioned?’ Perhaps the following remarks may furnish a partial answer to his question: The convicted sinner is usually disposed, on his first alarm, to resort to the Bible for light and relief; and he is right in doing so. But he is not unapt to open its pages with expectations which can never be justified by success. He looks directly for some instantaneous operation upon his mind, perceptible in itself and miraculous in its nature. He has, perhaps, heard of the wonderful influence thus produced upon others, and readily anticipates the same in his own behalf. Something is immediately to occur worthy of the power of the Divine

Word. Some energetic passage is to carry its force, at once, to the heart, with light and life. He reads.—No such result ensues.—And the disappointment changes the attitude of his thoughts, and the nature of the impressions.

Now the cause of this disappointment is obvious. His mind has been occupied with fanciful expectations, and the proper bearing of the truths which he read, was suffered to escape it. A miraculous energy was anticipated from language, without its reaching him by the ordinary channel of *reflection* and *comparison*. This is a perversion of the design of the Scriptures. And it was no wonder it was fruitless of all benefit to the heart or to the mind. Whatever extraordinary events of this kind may have occurred in the lives of others—and not a few of them have been the offspring of a heated imagination—they should never form the object of our own expectations. The dealings of the Holy Spirit are not likely to be inconsistent with what is suited to man as an intelligent and intellectual creature. Depend upon it, any expectation of miraculous influence, as the ground of consolation, or as the rule of

practice, is indicative of some radical defect. Here the hope is not placed upon any thing in the Word itself, but, virtually, on the expected influence, whatever it may be. This is a regard to neither reason nor revelation; but it may be the effect of that superstition to which a weak mind is ever prone; and from which an intellect of even greater strength is not always exempted. And if there be any thing, above all others, most adapted to promote an unhallowed enthusiasm, it is this.

I have known others who looked for no miraculous effect on their feeling, and yet who stretched their expectations to a point not less far: Who, in the midst of distressing fears, resolved to dismiss their apprehensions, or to change them into despair, by an appeal to which they were confident of an answer: and, for this purpose, resolved, that on opening the Bible the first passage should be taken as the answer from God respecting their future fate. And an instance is now presented to my own recollection, of this baneful trifling with the hidden things of God.

It was that of a female who had suffered a morbidness of feeling to weaken both her sense of duty and her judgment. In an un-

happy moment she had resolved to take the first verse which met her eye as her answer from Heaven. The experiment failed; for the verse was a portion of genealogy. The next trial presented a sentence quite as incapable of leading to any decision. The third produced a word of reproof to the impenitent sinner. This was deemed conclusive. The former failures were considered a reluctance on the part of her Maker to disclose her fate; and this idea strengthened the conviction that a final answer had been given her. The shock which succeeded this supposed discovery was followed by a gradual and growing indifference to the concerns of her soul. Happily, some years after these serious impressions returned; and the subject of them is now, we have reason to believe, an eminent Christian. And to this day, she does not cease to lament the presumption which kept her back so long from the Redeemer; and does she ever name the transition without emotion, in recollecting the danger to which it exposed her.

The impiety and absurdity of such a practice will plainly appear, when we recollect how diametrically it is opposed to the prescribed will of God, to whom alone secret things be-

long. We have no right to seek for supernatural evidence of our condition. This is to be ascertained only by the heart and the life. And any satisfaction which can ever be obtained in this forbidden way, will usually be unaccompanied with a single mark of grace. The heart will continue unaffected; and the disposition and temper will undergo no favourable change. All the gratitude which may be supposed to arise in the bosom, is the product of a selfish feeling; and will be disconnected with a love of the true character of God. The proper source of our comfort should be found in the fitness of the Word to our wants, and not in the particular state of our minds.

A third reason why the Bible continues a sealed book in the hands of many, is to be found in the listlessness with which they turn over its pages. We should imagine that one who is deeply impressed with a sense of his danger, would exert all his powers to obtain the meaning of what he believes to be the will of his God. Such, however, is not the fact. The very uneasiness or distress which drove him to seek a remedy in the Scriptures, frequently diverts his attention from them. His thoughts are confused. Or, if they are concentrated on

any point, it is that of his particular situation. It is thus he reads chapter after chapter, hardly knowing the nature of the subject before him: and when the task is, for a season, relinquished, not a trace is left in the memory. There is a strong temptation to such abstraction of mind; not only when we resort to the Word of God for relief under temporal affliction—when the subject of our sorrow usurps the place in our reflections which the remedy should take—but even when apprehensions of danger to our souls have induced us to apply to the Bible. Against this evil I would seriously caution you. The consequences which result at the time are not all that ensue: This inattention, repeated, easily grows into a habit; and thus, without being sensible of it, the Inquirer nullifies one of the very means of grace. Have you never detected yourself in this default? Have you not sometimes closed this life-giving volume, without being able to recollect a single perfect idea which it might have conveyed to your understanding?

Another reason why all expectation from the Sacred Record fails the Inquirer, consists in the impatience often attendant on his situation; especially where the natural temperament is

ardent and sanguine. I refer to the practice of turning eagerly and hastily from one passage to another, or from one part of the volume to another, without waiting to canvass the meaning of either. I do not mean here, as in a former case, that the object looked for is something to produce a sudden and miraculous effect. The reader, in this instance, is rather in pursuit of something descriptive of his present peculiar feelings; and yet does not wait long enough to ponder on any thing, to ascertain its meetness to his condition. He may not, as in the case first mentioned, expect a wonder to be wrought by an expression found at random, and made instrumental of comfort to him, foreign from its original design, or not, as may be; but he expects that whatever is adapted to the condition of his mind, will appear so at a glance.

That some parts of the Bible are not fitted to meet his cares is very certain; for relief to the mourner, or instruction to the convicted, was but one of the great ends for which it was intended by its divine Author. But it is equally certain that no part can effect the purpose desired, ordinarily, without serious thoughts on the side of the reader. Surely the man who is credibly informed that a certain document

contains a clause which materially affects his own interest, would weigh well each clause as he reads it. His attention would be arrested by every part which is not obviously distinct from his own concerns. How much rather should the awakened sinner examine the purport of the sacred pages, with reflection and care!

Others, again, miss their aim by forgetting the nature and character of the book, even while engaged in its perusal. This may be of serious consequence; and must necessarily retard the end they have in view.

Never cease to remember, My Dear Sir, that the instruction you are receiving as you pore over the Bible, is directly from God himself:—from him who is able to make it, through his blessing, effectual to your salvation. It is a solemn thought, which should occur to every reader—that *Jehovah speaks*. And the more deeply we can impress this upon our minds, while we hold the volume before us, the more confident may we be of success in our inquiry. Indeed it is from a sense of this, that we should hope to derive the virtues of the Divine Word. An infidel of my acquaintance, in looking over the pages of the Bible attempted to keep

in mind the *supposition* that the Creator was its author, merely with a design to discover the effect it might produce on his understanding. Now as it is sometimes possible for a lively fancy to produce, for a moment, the effects of truth itself, it was so here. Under the idea of divine authority, this reader saw something admirably adapted to the relation which man, as a dependent creature, sustains towards his Creator. Conviction of his own danger, and, subsequently, the knowledge of Jesus Christ, succeeded what was intended to have been at first, an experiment on the imagination.

You, My Dear Friend, need no proof that the Bible is of Divine authority. And yet it is very possible for you to keep this essential truth too far from your sight, and thus to lose the benefits it is adapted to convey.

One more error worthy of notice, is that of looking for a meaning in the Word of God which it was never designed to give: an expectation of a hidden something, to be brought to light by the Holy Spirit, through the medium of the Divine language: or in other words, of a certain additional quality to be communicated, by that powerful agent, to what the Inquirer is reading. — And I have sometimes known him to wait for this without taking any pains,

on his own part, to comprehend what he was perusing. An erroneous apprehension of this kind may be an effectual check to his success.

“The Office of the Holy Spirit,” to use the words of another, “is not to make known to us any truths which are not already contained in the Bible; but to make clear to our understandings the truths which are contained in it. He opens our understandings to understand the Scriptures. The Word of God is the instrument by which the Spirit worketh. He does not tell us any thing that is out of the record; but all that is within it he sends home with clearness and effect upon the mind. He does not make us wise above that which is written, but he makes us wise up to that which is written. When a telescope is directed to some distant landscape, it enables us to see what we could not otherwise have seen; but it does not enable us to see any thing which has not a real existence in the prospect before us.”

As to the question, ‘whether in the act of teaching us the meaning of the Scriptures, the Spirit imparts the necessary information by a direct communication to our minds,’—let me answer you in the language of an elegant writer of the present day: “A man that is born

blind, if placed in the centre of the most attractive scenery that nature ever exhibited, can see no objects. There are the objects; there is also the medium of vision; if it should please the Almighty to open his eyes, he will first discern them indistinctly, afterwards more clearly; and when more accustomed to the exercise of his newly acquired faculty of sight, he will be able to trace their forms, to distinguish their colours, and to make a correct calculation of their relative distances. He will, when his eyes are open, see no object which did not exist when he was blind; and when he does see them, it will be through the medium of *his own eye*, though for the capacity of vision he is indebted to a supernatural cause. So in reference to the spirit of God. He gives to us the power of spiritual discernment, but that power is exerted *through the medium of our own judgment*”*

The spirit opened the eyes of the apostles to see clearly the meaning of their ascended Master's instructions; many of which they had forgotten; and of none of which they had possessed a right understanding before. It is in the same manner he operates in the present day. And until he do so, the Gospel will be, as it respects

* Spirit and Manners of the Age.

our main object, a dead letter to the most gifted of us.

Such are some of the causes of an utter failure, in many instances, in the attempt to find relief in the word of God: And where either of these exist, such a failure should as certainly be expected as any effect is expected from its cause. It is hence that we sometimes hear the Awakened sinner declaring that his difficulties, instead of being removed, are multiplied; his anxiety, instead of being gratified in its demands, is baffled. This is harassing in the extreme.—But he should not have forgotten that, while the illumination of the Holy Spirit is necessary to a saving understanding of the Scriptures, the reader is bound to use all the means of acquiring that light; and to avoid every thing that could possibly impede it.

When I say that it is the Inquirer's duty to use all means of acquiring spiritual light, I refer not only to the exercise of prayer, which should accompany all his own exertions, but to the duty of making himself conversant with the plan of Salvation. That God may, and sometimes does bless his Holy Word, without clear and discriminating views on the subject,—especially where there is no opportunity of ac-

quiring them—is very certain. But, for the most part, it will be found that the Divine assistance is furnished in proportion to our own active and sincere desires; and to our efforts to obtain distinct apprehensions of the truth as it is in Christ. Where these are wanting, the hope of acceptance and pardon,—even though obtained—with all the comfort which attends it, is not only liable to fluctuations, but is even uncertain in its tenure. Trifling changes in outward circumstances, or in the animal spirits, may bring back a despondency which the prayer of faith had dissipated, unless the object of that faith be kept before the mind; an end which we can always accomplish the more readily as our views are more intelligent:—It was a good remark of an eminent Christian on his death-bed, that the calm and quiet of mind which he had so much enjoyed during life, arose, “not so much from a greater measure of grace than other Christians had, or from an immediate witnessing of the Spirit; but because he had a more clear understanding of the covenant of grace than many others; having studied and preached it so many years.”*

During a period of anxiety, when the Word

* Brook's Cabinet, p. 113.

of God seems to afford no consolation to the Inquirer, there is a strong temptation to rove abroad in search of something to meet difficulties and feelings, which are not then met by the sacred Volume. And it is indeed true that many excellent works of pious Divines may assist him in part of his perplexities. But I have sometimes had reason to fear that an undue dependence on these had impeded the progress of the reader. I have said an '*undue dependence*;' for there is always some hazard of this, when the language of Holy Writ has discouraged his efforts to understand its meaning. Guard against this temptation. Remember that all, in these works, which could be of value in your own case, is derived from the Bible itself. And whatever blessing may rest upon a prayerful perusal of them, is from the fact that they are a species of ministration of the Word. This is the fountain-head, from which all else are but so many streams, liable to a greater or less degree of impurity, as they pass through distant grounds.

And now, my friend, before I close this letter, I can not forbear expressing a fear that the remarks I have made may lead to an error in practice; and thus, by detaining you from the

great end in view, defeat my own purpose. Let me beseech you, then, not to wait for any given degree of knowledge before you discharge the primary duty of making an unreserved surrender of yourself to Christ. Clear and full perceptions of divine truth are indeed necessary to evangelical and substantial peace. But you know enough to understand that God demands your whole heart at once. While you withhold this, all else is a fruitless form. Renounce, then, yourself, and all that is of human expectation: and while you do so, be it your prayer—"enlighten thou mine eyes to behold the wonderful things contained in thy Law!"

Very truly,

Yours, &c.

LETTER IX.

The folly of expending time in attempting to reconcile difficult passages—
The duty of diligence in examining the proper application of the Truth
—The question, "what part of the Bible shall I read?"—Quotations—
Application of a Parable—A personal appeal to Christ directed in Scrip-
ture—Conclusion.

MY DEAR SIR,

IN order to obtain a right understanding of the Word of God, it is by no means necessary that you should engage your mind in endeavouring to elucidate its difficult passages, or to reconcile its apparent contradictions. This were an employment very distinct from your present purposes; and not unlikely to throw hindrances in your way. The mind of that man has a strong bias to skepticism, who insists on having every difficulty satisfactorily explained, before he will apply the sacred truths to himself. There is very little sincerity in his desires for spiritual peace, and no very deep sense of either his guilt or his danger. Thousands are partakers of the Hea-

venly blessing, who are far from being versed in these matters, and have very little curiosity about them. The convinced sinner has not time for such an occupation; and if he had, its influence is unsalutary. He whose peace is made with his God, might indeed employ a portion of his leisure in such a pursuit; but even then, the engagement should be secondary to the study of practical and spiritual truths, or the plan of salvation, as unfolded in the Gospel. But until that great end is completed, it is a wide departure from the line of duty to exercise our diligence in any thing not closely connected with matters of the heart. And you know that it is very possible to engross our attention with portions of the Bible which may have no tendency to furnish spiritual light, and which can in no way illustrate the important question before us. True conviction of sin, and evangelical repentance, arise from another quarter. And I should entertain as much hope,—and indeed more,—in the attempt to convince an infidel by the simplest truths of the Gospel, than by the best chain of reasoning, to establish its authenticity: for even the highest success in such an effort may bring him very little nearer to its

saving doctrines. I am equally sure, too, that the most complete success of the Inquirer, in his attempt to reconcile the difficult passages of the Bible—whatever self-complacency or pleasure may follow—will end in little or no moral good upon his mind. In the meanwhile, this diversion of his thoughts from the grand object of inquiry, is attended with a chilling and deleterious influence on his affections: And thus is the Sacred Book rendered an instrument, not of deepening his impressions, but of erasing them altogether.

The following direction may be of some importance:—Whenever, in the course of reading a practical or spiritual part of the Bible, you discover any thing which appears to convey an imperfect meaning, or presents no defined idea to your mind, ponder it well. Do not suffer it to escape your recollection, without extracting something from it. Never discard, as too abstruse, what on a little reflection may appear rich in meaning. It is attention to such a rule as this, which comprises a profitable reading of the Word. And a single sentence made the subject of deep thought, and rendered part of the materials of prayer, is worth

whole chapters of that more general attention, which we commonly give to other books.

All opposition, or repugnance, which the Inquirer may feel to the language or ideas of Scripture, should constrain him to greater importunity in prayer, while it proves, more fully, his need of divine assistance. Depend upon it, there is nothing in the whole progress of the Awakened Sinner's experience, which is not adapted, if he fairly consider it, to teach him the evils of his unrenewed state, and the duty of his entire dependence on God. Instead, then, of disheartening him in his pursuit, all the difficulties he may find, ought, by demonstrating to him the necessity of a radical change, to conduct him to that acceptable frame of mind, with which he can not approach a throne of grace in vain:—But of this, more hereafter.

The question which you ask—“*what part of the Sacred Volume do you recommend to my particular attention?*” is one which is very often proposed; and occurs very naturally to the mind of an Inquirer who is eager to reach some defined point, on which he desires to reflect with fixedness of thought. But it is a question not easily answered. Nor am

I by any means sure that a particular direction is always adviseable. The great variety of cases which are presented by the tempers and circumstances of different persons, would render any minute direction inexpedient. The best general advice which could be given, would perhaps, be, to become familiar with those portions which describe the sinfulness of our nature—The character of the Being with whom we have to do—and the way of pardon and reconciliation. Convinced as the Inquirer may be of his depravity or sin, he can not be too sensible of it, as the ground of his condemnation. A just knowledge of the Divine character will deepen this impression, and give it a definite form. While, at the same time, a distinct comprehension of the way of salvation, as it is revealed in the Cross, is indispensable to produce that humble and penitent frame of mind, without which there can be no true submission, and until we have attained which, all our cares will be unavailing.

In regard to *the natural state of man*, let me request you to examine, and apply, with care, the following passages, in connexion with those which are parallel.—It is of little consequence that I have not disposed them in order;

but it is of vast importance that here, and in all other instances of examining divine truth, you lay aside every pre-conceived notion of your own; and exercise all the candour which a subject of eternal life and death demands, at your hands.

“The imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth. Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? not one. What is man that he should be clean? And he which is born of a woman that he should be righteous? The Lord looked down from Heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand and seek God. They are all gone aside, they are altogether become filthy; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. Corrupt are they, and have done abominable iniquity. This is an evil among all things that are done under the sun, that there is one event unto all: yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead. Behold I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good and sinneth not. Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore

the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil. Wherefore as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin, and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned. Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past, in the lust of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath even as others. The whole world lieth in wickedness. The world hateth me, because I testify of it that the works of it are evil. The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”*

On the *fulness of pardon through the Redeemer*, examine the following: “He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep, have gone astray: we have turned every one to his own

* Gen. viii. 21. Job, xiv. 4. xv. 14—16. Ps. xiv. 1—3. liii. 1—3. Eccles. ix. 3. Ps. li. 5. Eccles. vii. 20 viii. 11. Rom. i. 21—23—27—29. v. 8, 10, 12. Eph. ii. 1—3. 1 John, v. 19. John, vii. 7. Rom. viii. 7. 1 Corin. ii. 14. Eph. iv. 17, 18.

way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness. Be it known unto you, therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins. In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace, who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father. This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. For I delivered unto you, first of all, that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time. For, by one offering, he hath perfected forever them that are sanctified. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness: And ye know that he was manifested to take away our sins. Who his own self bare our sins in his own

body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins should live unto righteousness.”*

And yet that all this may be of no avail to us without divine aid, is fully affirmed: “Man’s goings are of the Lord; how can a man then understand his own way. Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the Leopard his spots? then may ye also do good that are accustomed to do evil. All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him. A man can receive nothing except it be given him from Heaven. No man can come unto me except the Father, which hath sent me, draw him. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God. For by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.†

But that God willeth the salvation of the sinner, and tendereth his own blessing to the sincere penitent, is obvious from the follow-

* Is. liii. 5, 6. Zech. xiii. 1. Acts, xiii. 38. Eph. i. 7. Gal. i. 4. 1 Tim. i. 15. 1 Corin. xv. 3. Heb. i. 3. ix. 23. x. 14. 1 John, i. 7—9. iii. 5. 1 Pet. ii. 24.

† Prov. xx. 24. Jer. xiii. 23. Matt. xi. 27. John, iii. 27. vi. 44, 65. John, xv. 4, 5. viii. 43. 2 Cor. iii. 5. Eph. ii. 8.

ing: "Turn ye at my reproof; behold I will pour out my spirit upon you, I will make known my words unto you. I have not spoken in secret, in a dark place of the earth: I said not unto the seed of Jacob, seek ye me in vain. Look unto me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is none else. Incline your ear and come unto me; hear and your soul shall live. Seek ye the Lord while he may be found; call ye upon him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him: and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. As I live, saith the Lord, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live, turn ye, turn ye, from your evil ways; for why will ye die? For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God. Wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye. Oh Israel thou hast destroyed thyself, but in me is thy help. Turn ye to the strong hold, ye prisoners of hope: even to-day do I declare that I will render double unto thee. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness,

for they shall be filled. I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance. Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me: for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. For the Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost. If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. Behold I stand at the door and knock: If any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely. And the Spirit and the Bride say, come, and let him that heareth say, come, and let him that is athirst, come: and whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.”*

That God charges their failure upon sinner's themselves, is the current testimony of Scrip-

* Prov. i. 23. Is. xlv. 19, 22. lv. 1—3, 6, 7. Ez. xxxiii. 11, xviii. 32. Hos. xiii. 9. Zech. ix. 12. Matt. v. 6. ix. 12, 13. xi. 23, 30. Luke, xix. 10. John, vii. 37, 38. 1 Tim. i. 16. ii. 3, 4. Rev. iii. 18, 20. xxi. 6. xxii. 17.

ture: "Repent and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin. Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed, and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die? And he sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil."*

To all this, and the parallel passages, let me add the suggestion, that it would be well to study, attentively, each of the particulars in the Parable of the Prodigal Son: I have already had occasion to advert to this, by way of illustration. But it furnishes so rich and profitable a subject for serious thought—such prominent points of self-examination,—and so fine an insight into the relative attitudes of the penitent and his God, that I can not omit recommending it to your particular notice:

The subject of the story was a *wanderer far from his Father*. He was *destitute of every thing* that could satisfy the cravings of an im-

* Ezekiel, xviii. 30, 31. Matt. xxii. 3. xxiii. 37. John, iii. 19. viii. 45, 46.

mortal spirit. What a lively description of the natural man! His efforts to obtain food were vain. And how fruitless are the best devices to satisfy the longings of the soul! "No man gave unto him." Who *can* relieve him? All trust in an arm of flesh must end in disappointment. Neither his own works, nor sympathy, nor pity, is found to avail him. "*He came to himself.*" What a discovery he made of his forlorn condition! What a sensation of solitariness and abandonment, is that which now occupies the bosom of the dependent creature! He is alone. And help and hope are far from him. There is not within the compass of language a more emphatic sentence than this—" *He came to himself.*" What a host of reflections does it bring to the mind! The past, the present, and even the future—how they unite in carrying their gatherings of sorrow together! And what a flood of light do they pour into the dark chambers of that *self* to which he came! Here is reason, most abundant, for all that loathing of his condition which ensues in the mind of the sinner, under conviction of sin. And then the sense of shame in remaining from his father's house—his personal ingratitude—his

abuse of mercies—his base prostitution of the means of grace—how admirably are all these reflections adapted to sink him in the dust! It is in this state of distress that he recalls to mind the ability of his neglected parent to relieve him;—and he sees the fitness of the cheering invitations of the Gospel to his own condition. Instead of being exalted by the thought that all may yet be well with him, or elated in dwelling on the tender kindness of his parent, the very thought of parental favour sinks him lower—the legitimate effect, on a generous mind, of kindness from the injured party. And in this humility he would be fed as a servant—he would take the lowest condition—he aspires to nothing of self-exaltation. An active resolution succeeds these reflections—“*I will arise, and go to my Father.*” He does not lie still and bemoan his condition. He does not wait for future facilities. A sense of starvation will not permit the sufferer to speculate on frivolous matters. Nor does he inquire into any of the details which are unessential to his purpose. “*He arose.*” “*A great way off*” he was seen—met—greeted—and embraced. There is something affecting, too, in the simple statement of the inter

view. To the humble, and heart-felt confession of the Son, the Father gives no other answer than that of an order to clothe the tattered youth with a garment of honour—and to prepare a festival of rejoicing for his famishing child. And then how the feelings of the parties act on each other! The sense of shame and guilt, and the humility of the Son, awaken the piety of a compassionate parent: and the tenderness of the Father increases the self-condemnation of his offspring. Was ever description more true to nature?

One consideration we should never forget; for a recollection of it will prevent that confusion respecting the use of the promises, which is so very general: I mean that every promise, or invitation, is given through the Saviour: not merely that all salvation is the purchase of his blood, but that in the view of the promises themselves our eye is to be directed to him; and our application to be made personally to himself. His own language is—“come unto *me* all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and *I* will give you rest.” “Him that cometh to *me* I will in no wise cast out.”

After all, My Dear Sir, it is in comparing the words of Scripture with our own condi-

tion, that we use the proper means of rendering it of avail to ourselves. It is in the unison of the Divine language with our own state of mind, that any positive effect is produced upon us. As a general rule, therefore, the proper method of studying the Word of God implies a self-examination, at the same time; without which, whatever the Holy Spirit is able to effect, independent of direct means, we ought not to look for benefit to ourselves.

And, now, while I commend you to the good Word of God, and to a prayerful examination of its suitableness to your own case, may it indeed dwell in you richly in all wisdom. May its hallowed truths be carried home, with power to your heart, and bring to light within you, the day spring from on high!

Yours very truly.

LETTER X.

On right desires—The Young Man in the Gospel—A complaint of the Inquirer—One of the marks of right desires—A misinterpretation of Romans, ix. 3—Right desires not a mere fear of Hell—The breathings of an awakened sinner—Reformation of life connected with sincerity—And the spirit of forgiveness on our own part—Right desires not fitful—Trials—Advice.

MY DEAR SIR,

THERE is no inconsistency in saying that the sinner is directed to come to Christ without delay, and yet that if his desires be of an unsuitable character, all application will be vain. The invitations of the Gospel extend to all, whether they are accepted or not. And the command unto all men is, to repent, and to close with the terms of salvation. Even he whose care and labour are expended in search of earthly happiness, is not excluded from that general invitation. But then the tender of pardon and grace, as its language always clearly implies, requires the relinquishment of one pursuit, and the sincere engagement in another. It declares the inadequacy of worldly pleasures to the demands of the soul; and proposes a higher source of happiness. Now the only question is, whether the object held out by the

Gospel meet the consent and wish of the sinner. If it do so, no impediment, unless it be one of error in views, can remain in the way.

This is the sum of the whole matter before us. It is spiritual life and peace which are offered. And if they be acceptable to the sinner, why then all is well. But where the taste and affections cling to the world—or where an attempt is made to compromise between God and Mammon,—the object desired is not the peace of the Redeemer, or the enjoyment of spiritual life, but something of a sensual nature.

Such was the instance of the Young Man in the Gospel. He had heard of the tender of salvation through Jesus Christ, and he came eagerly to inquire, “what shall I do?” From childhood he had paid deference to the moral law; and the command to an external obedience here seemed no way inconsistent with a spirit of worldliness. But when he ascertained that the means of indulging in such a spirit were to be relinquished on the very entrance into a heavenly life, he sorrowed at the sight of the unwelcome alternative, and went away more hopeless than he came. He certainly desired salvation. But his heart was set upon the world. Communion with God or the spiritual

pleasures of the Christian were not “in all his thoughts.” The sacrifice which he was required to make would have been of no moment to one whose soul panted for the enjoyment of a holy intercourse with God; for a common desire in behalf of the two things is contradictory in its nature. It is plain, then, that he understood nothing of the character of the object about which he was inquiring. Eternal life must begin with spiritual dispositions; and for these he had no wish.

Now let me apply this case: the man who seeks for salvation may have an eye only to the *future* blessedness of the Christian, if so, he does not distinctly see what it is he professes to be seeking; or else he would discover within himself a repugnance to the very boon he solicits. He may be willing, on deliberation, to sacrifice his property rather than lose his soul; and he would certainly be so to save his life. But the pleasures of divine grace are not attractive to his moral appetite. Nor has he any present sincere wish that they should be so.

There is not a more common complaint on the part of a certain class of awakened sinners, than the following: “*My failure, after all*

my efforts to obtain peace with Christ, leads me to fear that my desires are, in some respects, spurious—wrong in their character,—and therefore inconsistent with the will of God.” And in answer to this, I have more than once known a still greater confusion created by metaphysical distinctions relative to the operations of the will; or by directions which occupy the attention with needless subtleties. Erroneous or unacceptable desires are only inclinations towards something else than the grace of God. And such is, more or less, the substance of all our mistakes on this subject.

A successful desire will be attended with a willingness to relinquish all things, in order to attain the great end in view. At the present day, we are not likely to be required to give up our whole property, or to forfeit our reputation, as a test of our sincerity. But we shall always be required to lend the whole weight of influence of both, to the cause of the Redeemer. If it be not commanded that we abandon the ordinary comforts or enjoyments of life, it is enjoined that we enter into none of those which are inconsistent with a demeanour of piety, or which could cool our

affections, or unfit us for dévotional duties: Or, in other words, that whatever will interfere with attainments in grace, or holiness, should be relinquished. In this requisition there is nothing but what is consistent with our own happiness, and with the very end we profess to have in view.

I am aware that far-stretched suppositions have sometimes been formed on this subject as tests of the disinterestedness and submission of the Inquirer. Some have affirmed, that in order to obtain the divine favour we should so completely surrender our hearts and will to God, and so disinterestedly refer to his honour, as to be willing, if it would promote his glory, to endure the loss of the soul. This extravagant notion is not founded on mistaken ideas of love to God alone: but has been supported by a misinterpretation of the passage you have quoted, in which the Apostle is supposed to profess the relinquishment of his own salvation, for the greater glory to God in the salvation of many.* But I see nothing in this passage to countenance such an idea. The following paraphrase, by a judicious expounder of Scripture, comes much nearer to the meaning of St.

* Rom. ix. 3.

Paul: "For methinks I could even wish that as Christ subjected himself to the curse, that he might deliver us from it, so I myself likewise were made anathema after the example of Christ; like him exposed to all the execrations of an enraged people, and even to the infamous and accursed death of crucifixion itself, for the sake of my brethren and kinsmen according to the flesh, that they might thereby be delivered from the guilt they have brought upon their own heads."* The Apostle could never have intended to say that he was willing to lie under the eternal wrath of God for any consideration of possible good that might accrue from the doom. Such a supposition implies a palpable contradiction: it declares that so great was his love of God, that, if it would promote his honour, he was willing to be doomed to hate him for ever.

We have no right to indulge in such paradoxical fancies. And it is visionary to test our sincerity by questions which the Scriptures have never presented to our notice. Moreover, to require evidence from ourselves of the strongest love to our Creator, as a prelude to giving ourselves up to him, is to require that we become

* Doddridge, *in loco*.

sincere Christians—or that we be already what it is supposed we are seeking to be.

Besides, we may deceive ourselves by a very natural error here: God demands that we forego all that is earthly, or that we render all things subservient to our spiritual interest. In view of this requirement, and under an affecting sense of his danger, the awakened sinner may easily say—"I would give up all for Christ"—while, at the same time, he may be insensible that it is a legal tender he is making—a barter of one thing for another: and connected with this, he may feel as if he had a *right* to the gift that he asks. The effort which is visible in such an offer, renders it perfectly plain that pardon could avail him very little; for his heart is still set on the things he professes to relinquish. Now, although the invitations of the Gospel are so universal, the promises of God are made only in behalf of a certain state of mind, to which their fitness is expressed by their own terms: the hungry, the thirsty, the poor in spirit, &c. And in order to ascertain our sincerity, it is hence our questions should arise, respecting the nature of our desires.

A mere wish to escape the sufferings of Hell may make up but a small part of the desires of the true penitent: and although there may be always a variety of degrees of such feeling in different cases; I have sometimes known of those to whom it hardly occurred as a perceptible part of their solicitude. The Scriptural descriptions of Hell are well suited to alarm. They do so by an appeal to our natural desire of self-preservation. But then the directions to fly from the wrath to come are only a use of the Law to lead us to Christ. While they fix our attention on the penalty of neglect, on the one hand, they may induce us on the other, to examine the way of salvation,—a comparison of which with our true condition as it is, should impress us with a sense of our wants. “Devils believe and tremble.” They believe in the display of that eternal justice of which they are victims. The dying impenitent sinner, too, would willingly fly from the wrath to come. But neither of these has an inclination to holiness.

It is thus with the spurious desires of many, who have no wish for present purity; or none for its own sake. But who, on the contrary,

feel a willingness for spirituality only as the less of two evils.

Further: True desires may be connected with no remarkably clear views of the loveliness of grace. I will suppose the Inquirer to utter the breathings of his heart in such language as the following: “I see, in some measure, not only the danger, but the emptiness of a worldly portion. I have not tasted of the excellency of a divine life, but I can form some vague idea of its value, and its suitableness to a state of glory. I can discover nothing in myself that promises hope, but every thing that encourages despair. I can exclaim, with Peter, ‘to whom shall I go, *thou* hast the words of eternal life.’ Yet I am sensible that I do not love God—would that I did! How contemptible is every thing compared with this love !”

And can you say this? And do you earnestly wish to know the whole truth as it is? And in all this have you said—“I desire to desire aright”—“I believe, help my unbelief?”

Sincerity as was before intimated, is inseparable, from an effort on our own part, to reform our disposition and life. Whatever temper is opposed to a holy life—whatever unhallowed practice—whether great or little,—will be free-

ly relinquished. The right eye is to be plucked out, or the right hand is to be cut off, and the executioners of the sentence are to be ourselves. We are not to wait, in the hope that another and more gentle hand will relieve us without an exertion on our own part.

There is one thing here which is too frequently overlooked: The feelings of prejudice which we have entertained against any one, even with a belief in their justice—or a retaliatory disposition under a sense of wrong received,—must be extinguished. All possible pains must be taken to destroy it. Before we bring our gift to the altar, we are not only to repair wrongs committed by ourselves, but we are to foster a conciliatory temper. This is a hint of far more extensive application than may be generally imagined. I have seen those whose sense of injury received, or whose personal wound of pride—kept open as it was by embittered recollections,—detained *them*, while they knew it not, from the great object of their pursuit. They could express a willingness to *forgive* but not to forget, while they did not reflect that the temper which suggested this disposition, was that of a haughty bearing—utterly unsuited to the posture of a sup-

pliant for mercy. "Forgive as *I* forgive" is the tenour of acceptable prayer. But this petition indicates not only a desire that our sins may not be set to our account, but that according to the divine blessing, they may be "covered over"—remembered no more. How suitable to the state of some Inquirers is the consideration of this part of the Lord's prayer! How fitting to a mind that would be prepared to love Him, whose pardon is sought, by a meekness and gentleness of disposition. And how well is it adapted to develope traits of a perverse temper, where they have taken their secret seat!

Acceptable desires will possess a permanency of character. It is permanency which most distinguishes *principle*. Fitful wishes can produce no real good, and they designate an important defeat somewhere. I do not mean that the strength or intensity of desire should continue exactly the same in any one. This is hardly to be expected. But the prevalent leaning of the mind will be to the grand concern before him. His thoughts may be diverted from it by transient occurrences; but they will then still sustain an unfixed character, like the shaken magnetic needle, until they are suffered

to return to the direction in which alone they can rest. It is this permanency which gives the Inquirer an opportunity of turning every thing to account, in the ordinary occurrences of life. His bias of thought enables him to derive some incentive to perseverance from every thing with which he is concerned; while it will assist him to gather from the same, a deeper insight into his own natural character.

I have tried to impress upon your mind, on a former occasion, that the whole difficulty on the part of the sinner may be resolved into his unwillingness to take God upon his own terms. —And it is not difficult to prove, that all the interval between first impressions, and the peace which flows from a reconciliation with Christ, is occupied in a manner which clearly testifies to the truth of this position. And is it not a melancholy fact that all this time is occupied in controversy with God? “Whosoever *will*, let him come,” is the language of Holy Writ: And the reason why the Word of God does not take up the different trials of the sinner, and present to our notice the minute experience of distinct cases—which you seem to think so necessary—is, that as all obstructions are referrible to some fault in the sinner himself, they

may be seen in the broad statement of his own reluctance to be saved, or in that of the deceitfulness and treachery of the heart. Of the danger accruing from these, he is warned as distinctly as possible. It would hardly be important, then, to extend these details. Whenever the experience of a change in the heart of the sinner is marked and distinct, he is usually able to date it from the time in which he felt able to relinquish all hold on himself or the world. And it is then he can most clearly discover that all his previous detention from hope consisted in a defect here.

I must again entreat you to think no more of the many trials which seem to accompany all your exertions. You ought to be able to ascertain their true meaning; and to see in them an additional reason for an immediate and unqualified surrender to Jesus Christ. And then you will observe that they have been over-ruled as instruments of conferring on you a greater knowledge of yourself and God.

The idea that so many evil thoughts come into your mind, is indeed painful. But these do not necessarily prove your desires to be false and unacceptable. The best of Christians have reasons to mourn over this. And you are

to discriminate between tempting thoughts to which your inclination assents, and those which arise in opposition to your will, and which you prayerfully endeavour to repress. Should you ever have reason to indulge the hope of the Christian, you will not cease to lament your depravity. And now, while the great issue is pending, you are not to expect that Satan will relinquish his hold, without a vigorous effort to retain you. The rejoicing of Heaven over a renewed soul is answered by the malignant groans of Hell at the loss of a victim. Reply to every discouraging suggestion of the adversary by the Word of God. So did the redeemer himself. And whenever those discouragements are suggested by the Scriptures, recollect that it is by detached and mutilated sentences. It was so, too, in the temptation of Christ.* Abide by his example in every such trial.

I will conclude this letter by remarking that a serious Inquirer, who was much tried by evil

* In this instance, the quotation of Satan—" *He shall give his Angels charge concerning thee,*" is imperfect. It wants the adjunct,—"*In all thy ways :*" that is, in the ways of one "*dwelling in the secret place of the Most High.*" He shall indeed be kept "*in all his ways*"—for these imply a cordial obedience to the will of Jehovah : departing from which, with any hope of safety, would be *tempting God*.

thoughts, once told me that he never failed in his efforts to discard them, when he carefully pondered over the fifty first Psalm. There is, indeed, much in it to occupy your reflections, and to present as subjects of prayer.

Farewell,

Yours, as ever, &c.



LETTER XI.

Difficulties in prayer—Causes—Mistake respecting the nature of prayer—Confusion in the mind of the Inquirer—False anticipations in prayer—Perplexity from our ignorance of the person addressed—Directions in prayer—The duty of describing personal trials—Habit of attention—Remedy for wandering thoughts—Application of special promises—Scriptural examples—Seasons for Prayer—Ejaculatory desires—Forms—Does God “ever withhold his Grace, for a season, to try the sinner?”—Answered.

MY DEAR SIR,

You are right when you say, that “no class of difficulties seems more serious to the Inquirer than those relating to the duty of prayer.” Easy as it may have appeared, formerly, to offer a petition to the throne of grace, his disappointment is frequently as complete as that which he experiences in reading the Scriptures. The discovery which he may make in

the first attempt to pray, is mortifying and distressing: and it ought to be humbling, too. He sees that the utterance of a form of words, and the posture of supplication, on which he would have once depended, may be a very different thing from that exercise of heart which is carried on near the mercy-seat. He looks back with astonishment, to those unmeaning acts of outward devotion, with which he had once satisfied his conscience, and for which he expected, in return, the favour of his God. He sees that there was a something wanting of which he had not thought; and which he now labours to obtain. Perhaps there is no discovery more striking to the mind of the awakened sinner than this. And certainly none more alarming to his fears. And all the general directions which he receives on the subject, appear either inapplicable to his own case, or wholly impracticable for him. In a strait of this kind, advice is often thrown away, although given by the lips of prudence and piety. All representations of divine mercy are ineffectual. To others, he conceives, they may be suitable; but not to himself. And to every thing of the kind, he opposes the palpable evidence of his utter incompetency to ex-

press any thing but empty sounds, which reach no further than the atmosphere above him. Let us endeavour to account for this:

One of the first causes which occur to us, is that of *a mistake respecting the nature of prayer*. So confident was he in the attribute of mercy, that he believed any application which might be made, infallibly successful. To the bare expressions of prayer he had attributed a sovereign influence; without any reference to the state of the heart of the petitioner, or to a sense of his personal wants. He makes the experiment in the first hour of his alarm. And he ends it, as might have been expected, with a sensation of disappointment. Now, the whole reason of this failure may be summed up in a single word—*ignorance*: Ignorance of what he was doing—of the character of his God—or of the nature of the object desired. Had this man sat down for a moment, and reflected on these things, be assured, the tenour of his prayer would have been very different from what it was. Instead of asking for an undefined something—instead of looking for what he did not understand, he would have seen the necessity of praying—“enlighten thou mine eyes!” He might have seen the

importance of giving himself up, at once to his God—as awfully ignorant as well as helpless. And he would have seen, too, the duty of approaching the great Arbiter of his fate, with a very different idea of his holy character.

Never let us, My Dear Sir, venture on the solemn act of addressing Deity, without pausing to inquire of ourselves, what we are about to do. Reflection and self-examination should always precede the exercise of prayer: not on our own account alone, but likewise on that of Him who demands the homage of both the understanding and the heart.

Another cause of failure consists in that confusion attendant on the anxiety of the awakened sinner. The painful agitation which accompanies the conflict of the passions at this time, often indisposes the mind to any thing direct. This is a natural effect of powerful or unexpected grief, in even temporal circumstances; and I have already adverted to it, in a former Letter. The feelings may so completely overcome the judgment as to prevent any proper application of the faculty of thought. In this state of distress we hear him exclaim—“*Oh I can not pray!*” He makes the effort again and again; but only to

relinquish it as hopeless, after each instance of trial.

This is sometimes an awful condition of mind. The moral darkness within, which the sufferer vainly attempts to dissipate, is as it were in contrast with the light of the natural world around him, and seems to tell fearfully to his soul. The tumult in his bosom that breaks out into the loud sigh, or the heaving and reluctant groan, that interrupts the stillness of his place of retirement—and the silence which succeeds it, and seems to pervade the universe of his being, as if to intimate a negative to any hopes of relief—are all portentous to an alarmed imagination. An undefined but horrible sensation of vacancy attends the exclamation—"I am lost!" Attempts to force the way through this darkness and despair,—half frantic and impulsive as they are—serve only to render the sense of wretchedness more complete, and the conviction of hopelessness more decided. This case is not quite an extreme one. And different degrees of approach to it you have often noticed in biographical sketches. The great perplexity here consists in the inability to give vent to the pent-up feeling——

“If I could only pray—If I could give utterance to thought—or if I could be sensible that my broken cry is heard—either of these would relieve me of at least part of the weight which I am doomed to sustain!” Here the spirit is wounded by an unseen hand, and yet knows not where nor how. The exclamation—“help, Lord, or I perish!” is made with entire distrust. Consideration or reflection are afar off; or they have no certain object.

Now, even in this case, we should direct the Inquirer to prayer. But it would be with the same advice given in the last instance—let him think what he is to pray for. Let him remember that the mere burst of passion is, not unfrequently, the indulgence of a selfish feeling, encouraged to excite compassion or sympathy; and exceedingly apt to produce that sensation of self-complacency, which is not easily accounted for, but which hides or palliates, the deformity of guilt: and that while he may be insensible of the effect on himself.

God, My Dear Sir, is not the author of confusion. And we are not to attribute such effects as these to him; and then to ask his relief without knowing what we require. Still, if we are making every effort to understand our own

situation; and find them all ineffectual, we may take our very cares on this subject to the Mercy Seat: and in the language of one of old, have reason to say—"I am full of confusion, therefore see thou mine affliction."

It is not necessary, however, to suppose so great a chaos of mind as this confusion implies, in order to insure the same failure. There may be conviction of sin, and sense of want; some vague notion of a distant Saviour; and yet the sensation,—if I may so express myself,—of a void space, wherever the thoughts roam in search of a resting place. And this may be, sometimes, the experience of the Christian himself, when some secret sin, or some lurking habit of evil, has insensibly removed his peace, and created a solitude of feeling, and a dejection of spirit. And when, until the latent cause is brought to view, he roams abroad, like the dove of Noah, seeking in vain for an element to which he had been accustomed, or for a place of repose which he had formerly known. And what energy of meaning—what full utterance of feeling is that which he conveys in the words of the Patriarch—"Oh, that I knew where I might find him! that I might come even to his seat! I would order my cause be-

fore him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I would know the words which he would answer me, and understand what he would say unto me!"*

Another cause of failure consists in a *false anticipation of the kind of answer to be given by the hearer of prayer*. The transport of joy—the delightful feeling of a holy confidence,—the assurance of pardon—the plain proof of heavenly communion—or the sudden removal of anxiety—these, or some of them, are generally the objects of sanguine expectation with an ardent mind. And even he who is near to the kingdom of Heaven may detain himself from all he is seeking, while he perversely insists on certain results in certain prescribed forms. Now, the answer to prayer may be of a very different character. An exact compliance with our wishes may be inconsistent with our good. Paul's thrice-told petition obtained an answer essentially different from his expectations. But then that answer subserved an equally good purpose with the one he had sought. And thus it will often be. Instead of conscious peace and pardon a deeper sense of sin may ensue in the bosom of the pe-

* Job, xxiii. 3, 4, 5.

nitent. Instead of participation in the pleasures of a communion with God, the only evidence of acceptance may be in those fervent aspirations of soul which may indicate a change unknown to himself.

I admit with you that one who has never hitherto exercised any earnestness in the act of prayer, and who proceeds to that duty with seriousness for the first time, may feel at a loss respecting the personal object of his address. Accustomed to things of sense as he has been, he may find a difficulty in addressing a Being spiritual and invisible; of whom he attempts in vain to form some idea, while he conceives that a just conception of him, as a person, is indispensable to a right and fixed direction of of the mind. And it is not uncommon to call in the aid of imagination, in order to figure the very appearance of Him to whom the prayer is to be preferred. And the flitting and varying representation which this faculty presents, increases the disorder which already reigns within the soul. Nor would it be extraordinary, in such a dilemma, if we find ourselves engaged in the double exertion of sustaining the imagination in its work, and canvassing our wants and desires, at the same time. I have

sometimes heard the Inquirer, while unaffectedly distressed, asking, “in what form he is to conceive of God, and how he is to bring within the range of his mental vision, the Being whom he wishes to address:” and yet the complaint is not one, for the most part, which is openly made. It more usually belongs to the secret experience of the Inquirer.

The difficulty here arises entirely from the state of the petitioner’s mind. If the sense of his wants were less vague, and if the specific design of his prayer were rendered distinct by a particular knowledge of them, he would see no reason for this complaint. It is not any defined appearance of his Maker that he should call to his aid—nor are we at liberty to indulge in such fantasies—but it is a consciousness of the unhallowed condition of our hearts, and their absolute necessities, which can form a prayer of faith and feeling.

That sense of distance, too, between himself and his Creator, of which the Inquirer so often speaks, is to be removed by a better knowledge of his own heart. It is this alone, bitter and painful as it may be, which will produce the opposite sensation of the nearness of Deity to us. You observe an illustration of

this remark in any instance of strong remorse, in which the sufferer makes a very different complaint, while he is conscious that the all-seeing eye of his Maker is upon him, and feels as if the space were narrow between him and his Judge.

No difficulty ought to arise in our minds from our notions of the Trinity. The Scriptures have very distinctly made it our duty, in our private devotions, to address ourselves to Jesus Christ. And this, as I have before said, was a direction of his own. As our Mediator and Advocate we approach to him. Thus there is no higher act of faith to which a believer can be called, than that of committing his departing soul to the care of his God: And the dying language of the first Christian Martyr was, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"*

Let me subjoin a few reflections respecting the exercise of prayer, which may possibly be of some assistance in that important duty:

Endeavour to describe your personal trials and perplexities, when you come to a throne of grace. This practice, with that of confessing our sins, at the same time, recom-

* Some judicious remarks on this subject may be found in "Owen's Cases of Conscience."—Discourse V. vol. xvi. of his works.

mended as it is by the examples of the saints, and enjoined as it is by the Word of God, has many advantages which may not, at first, occur to the mind of the Inquirer. It is true, indeed, that our Creator knows the extent and aggravations of our guilt, and the nature of our wants; but he requires *us* to know them likewise. He is not ignorant of our necessities; but he would see us sensible of them ourselves. Now, the detail of these presupposes us to have examined our hearts, and to have formed at least some acquaintance with them. And this very act of narrating is admirably adapted to produce that humility of mind and temper, and that sense of dependence, without which we shall certainly plead in vain. The very recounting of our personal trials and difficulties brings us almost certainly nearer to Him to whom they are told; while it is suited to promote our faith and confidence in him. You have sometimes noted how clearly this is illustrated in a case of temporal suffering. The man who sits down to write an account of his distresses to one from whom relief is possible, not only discovers himself more sensible of his situation, and is more affected by it, in the engagement; but his hope of success in the application, and

his expectations of sympathy, continue to increase. The direction of Jesus Christ, then, is founded in wisdom, and admirably fitted to our nature, when he bids us present all our cares to him, and communicate all our wants.

Endeavour to keep your attention as fixed as possible, while engaged in this exercise. There is no fault into which we more easily fall than that of a wandering of thought. Now, apart from the sinfulness of this, as the very essence of hypocrisy, it is likely to be followed by consequences to ourselves of the most dangerous character. Wandering thought in devotion, of all other sins, most easily becomes a habit, by a partial indulgence; and it most unconsciously steals upon us. A single instance of this extends itself to our next effort. And the petitioner may find the unhappy propensity almost beyond the power or reach of his arrest. The best remedy, perhaps, for so insidious an evil, is that of uttering our thoughts aloud. The small degree of exertion which this requires, is well suited to the exigency of the case. It enforces attention; and prevents that distraction which external objects so readily produce in the mind. It does more. It makes an impression which may be

durable after the act is over. A judicious friend who complained much of his temptation here, in seasons set apart for meditation, has since observed that he never failed to find "thinking aloud" an effectual means of preventing abstraction from the subject of his reflections.

Apply special promises to special cases in prayer. I have already hinted the importance of turning the precepts of God into prayer; and the duty of applying to ourselves whatever Scriptural passages meet our condition. We should do the same with the promises of the Divine Word. There is something exceedingly encouraging in presenting the very words of Him who can aid us, at the throne of grace; and so far as they suit our condition we are warranted in doing so. There seems a special hope of a blessing in the very reflection that the same spirit which indited the language of Holy Writ, is said to assist the earnest and sincere petitioner.* You will no doubt recollect how common was the practice which I am commending among "good men of old." Jacob urged, for an important purpose, that Jehovah had bidden him leave his country and

* Rom. viii. 26.

kindred, and had given him assurance of security.* Solomon presented the promise which had been made to his father David.† Jehoshaphat named that which had been given to Solomon.‡ Daniel reads the pledge to Jeremiah, and then applies it in his prayer.¶ The Apostle Paul embraces the promise which had been given to Joshua so long before, and makes it the ground of an unshaken confidence in his own day.§ And Simeon expired in the very arms of a gracious promise, with the breathings of prayer.¶ And what an encouragement have we in the reflection that the special ground of an answer to prayer lies in the performance of promises. The faithfulness of God is our surety.

Regard proper seasons of prayer. I do not mean, simply, that stated periods should be set apart for this purpose. It would always be well to form and sustain a habit of this kind; the violation of which, especially where it is not necessary, has certainly an unhappy effect on our subsequent devotions. But there are seasons when the heart of the Inquirer, to use a strong figure, is *full*: when

* Gen. xxxii. 9. † Kings, viii. 24. ‡ 2 Chron. xx. 8. ¶ Dan. ix. 2, 3.
§ Heb. xiii. 5, 6. ¶ Luke, ii. 29.

his feelings are more tender, his desires more strong; and his sense both of his wants, and the nearness of his God, is more distinct. These should never be suffered to pass unimproved. They are distinguished by signals for prayer: and its utterance would be more free, while its pleas would be more urgent, than at fixed and regular periods. I doubt whether there ever was a sincere Inquirer who was not sensible of this difference in the state of his feelings. The same susceptibility which exposes him to changes from trifles inimical to serious thought, prepares him for impressions of a different nature from more favourable incidents. A passing word, or a petty circumstance which had no direct reference to his state of mind, may sometimes produce a more powerful effect, in softening and subduing the heart, than hours of sober reflection.

I am aware that it may not always be convenient to retire for the immediate improvement of such effects. But it would be well to sacrifice a less advantage for a greater; and to endeavour to improve as fully as possible, what may really be the operation of the Holy Ghost upon the mind. But where this is wholly impracticable, let ejaculatory prayer

supply the place of more regular devotions. It is a delightful reflection that God is with us every where: and is every where ready to listen to the cry of the sincere penitent. Some of the most effectual prayers recorded in the Bible, are of an ejaculatory character. And the Saviour himself, to whom we offer our desires, has set us an eminent example. Nor indeed do I believe,—if it were right to institute the comparison,—that the observance of set seasons for devotion so completely evinces a proper frame of mind—all important as it is—as an habitual readiness and disposition to earnest ejaculatory prayer. Here, too, the secular avocations of life can create no serious interruption. The heart may hold converse with God in the midst of the bustle and distractions of the world.

With respect to forms of prayer—they may sometimes be necessary; and the plea of indolence, or ignorance, or diffidence, is frequently preferred in their behalf. But I have always thought them unfavourable to the interest of the Inquirer. It would hardly be practicable for any man to form a prayer precisely suited to the state and exigences of another. Any such attempt would be defective in those par-

ticulars which most nearly concern our private experience, and the description of which would require an intimate knowledge of our own case. Expressions, confessions and terms, are of necessity general; and do not reach far into the heart. And, independent of this, they, not unfrequently, create a wrong leaning of the mind; while they form a marked contrast with that freshness of desire which springs warm from the bosom. I have said “a wrong leaning,”—for all subjects of prayer do not closely fit the case of the Inquirer; and where they do not, they tend to increase his confusion and perplexity, however well indited they may be: An effect which he very frequently discovers in the devotions of the sanctuary.—The utter impossibility of suiting any public leading in prayer to the wants of all, and the duty of each presenting his own case, seems to have been *referred* to by Solomon at the dedication of the Temple—“what prayer and supplication soever be made by any man, or by all thy people Israel, *which shall know every man the plague of his own heart*, and spread forth his hands towards this house: then hear thou in Heaven thy dwelling place, and forgive and do, and give to every man accord-

ing to his ways, whose heart thou knowest;
(*for thou, even thou only, knowest the
hearts of all the children of men.**)

Advantageous as these set compositions may be in certain instances, in public worship—and even then they require frequent alterations to suit the circumstances of the time and the age—they are not adapted to the private use of the Awakened Sinner. Besides—the very attempt to express our own personal wants, not only gives us a clear insight into ourselves, and thus constitutes one of the means of promoting the great end in view, but it adds intensity to the sense of want and the feelings of desire, and leaves an impression which may be abiding and salutary.

It does more: if the directions I have already given be followed, the practice of extemporaneous prayer will lead us to cultivate a familiar acquaintance with the Word of God. Habituate yourself, then, to the use of your own language; however feeble and incoherent you may deem it, the Great Hearer of prayer will never reject it on account of its verbal imperfections.

You ask, *whether God ever withholds his grace from the Inquirer in order to try him*

* 1 Kings, viii. 38, 39.

further, after he is already endued with a penitent and humble frame of feeling?"

The whole tenour of my letters is against the affirmative of this question. But it may deserve something more explicit:

I have more than once known those in deep distress advised to persevere under the idea that the Dispenser of pardon may be testing their patience; or, in other words, waiting until they acquire this virtue, as a preliminary to the reward of acceptance. This is not only injudicious, but it is unscriptural. And, instead of proving an incentive to perseverance, as it is intended to be, it is discouraging in the extreme. The unregenerate sinner can achieve nothing to *entitle* him to favour: And there is no intermediate state, in which he can ever be supposed, between ruin and grace. Nor can any withholding, on the part of God, when the sinner approaches aright, detain him in the former of these conditions. If it were otherwise, and we were allowed a supposition on this subject, then the death of the sinner, in that intermediate state, would leave the fault of his final rejection from Heaven at the door of the Author of his being.

The examples which you have quoted in

“the Syrophenician woman,” “the importunate widow,” and the “neighbour soliciting bread,” were never designed to encourage such a conclusion; nor have they any reference whatever to the case. The trials which God may suffer his people to undergo, while he supports them at the same time, and improves some grace within them to their ultimate good, is no indication that he ever would stand back, a single moment from the penitent sinner. To require immediate and unconditional submission on our own part, and to tender the promises in return, and then to delay their fulfilment, has never been the manner of the Divine dealing. The prayer of the true penitent is answered at once, although it may not be in a way perceptible to himself, nor with the immediate consequences to his own mind, which he had fondly anticipated. We must learn to distinguish between the *manner* and the *thing*: between an utter refusal and the mode of conferring the boon. I should not hesitate to say to any complainer on this subject, that either his prayer was already answered, or the fault was entirely his own. Nor can we escape this inference while we consider the Creator consistent with him-

self. I can not, therefore, restrain an expression of regret when I read a contrary sentiment in works expressly designed to relieve or assist the Inquirer. Any question of this nature seems so clearly and unequivocally settled in the Word of God, that it is a matter of surprise how it should involve a doubt in any other mind, than one harrassed by its fears, and confused by its perplexities.

Adieu, Dear Sir——may the spirit of prayer richly abound in you, and may you realize, in its exercise, the full assurance of grace, mercy, and peace!

Truly yours, &c.

LETTER XII.

A common error adverted to again—An evil from Theological distinctions—Different kinds of repentance—The Scriptural distinction—Sorrow does not constitute repentance—The perversion of legal sorrow to a false hope—Examples—The error reprov'd in Scripture—Its cause—Causes leading to repentance—Conviction of sin—Why not to be effected without Divine aid—Looking to Christ a means of repentance—The process—Evangelical sorrow follows—Difference between counterfeit and true repentance—Conclusion.

MY DEAR SIR,

THERE is one error which I have had reason several times to mention, as possessing a more pervasive influence in the mind of the Inquirer than any other: I refer to the idea that there is a certain something to be obtained by him before he ventures to approach the Redeemer with the hope of mercy, or even the hope of an audience. And this error creeps into his very notion of the Christian graces. It puts a construction on the Divine language foreign from its true import, and renders reflection upon it the means of increasing confusion. You have known the application of this remark to the duty and doctrine of *repentance*. And I have frequently seen the

convinced sinner keeping aloof, and at least half satisfied with himself in doing so, until he may be able to ascertain whether he has evidence of true repentance; without which he would conceive all application nugatory, and accompanied with which he would be assured of a favourable answer. The amount of all which is, that he desires to be a Christian before he asks the Divine influence, which is to render him such—that he would have evidence of being saved before he solicits salvation. This practical contradiction is too flagrant to need a comment.

Another evil on this subject arises from those theological distinctions respecting the nature of this grace, with which the Inquirer may often be more entertained than edified. A clear view of repentance, and of its place in the covenant of God, is certainly important. But the adoption of metaphysical distinctions, and a nice and accurate discrimination of the consecutive order of certain causes and effects, is rather an accomplishment in the Theologian, than an advantage to the Inquirer. Instead of reviewing the past to discover the evidence of a direct approach to repentance, or to institute a comparison of such workings with

other things, the only duty before you is to learn whether you have indeed repented. To assist you in this, I will reduce within the limits of a single letter, all that appears to me essential on the subject.

Practical divines have divided repentance into three kinds: the first is called *natural*, and it is supposed to have no reference to rewards or punishments; as when a man of integrity and honour regrets the commission of an act which violates the rules he had adopted for his own guidance, but without fearing, or thinking of, any consequences arising from the law of God. I will not stay to discuss the justness of this distinction. The second division, is that of *legal repentance*, which is simply a regret of the commission of sin on account of its personal consequences in the penalty of a violated law. Different from this, *evangelical repentance* is both a principle and a habit, and belongs to the Christian alone, while it is accompanied with a class of feelings peculiar to itself. These I shall describe on another page of this sheet.

There are two words in the Scriptures which our translators have rendered by the

term repentance.* The first of these signifies “after reflection,” or, “after care, and anxiety.” It indicates a simple alteration of feeling,—sorrow on account of something that has taken place on our own part, without any reference to the nature of that sorrow, or its durability; and without any connexion with the moral character of the act, or its eternal consequences. You have an example of this in the man who has expended time or money in a deed of benevolence, and regrets having done so.

The second word, which is literally translated, “a change of mind,” is designed to designate an alteration for the better, and refers to the purposes and dispositions of the heart. It indicates not only sorrow for the past, but such a radical change in the affections as to create a permanent abhorrence of the evil. In 2 Corinthians vii. 10, you will find both these words in the original Greek, with the constructions now assigned them.

If I were to select the mistake most common to Inquirers on this subject, I should certainly point to the impression that *sorrow constitutes repentance*, and that its intensity is the

* Μεταμέλεια and Μετανοια.

test of sincerity. And it is this idea which frequently leads the Inquirer to exertion to deepen his grief, without examining its character or its cause. Mere sorrow, without reference to these, may be very distinct from the grace in question. Judas exhibited this; and according to the first sense of the word, repented of his sin; but the feeling terminated in suicide. The Jews, on the day of Pentecost, were in deep sorrow when they cried out "men and brethren, what shall we do?" The answer of Peter directed them to repentance. But the distinction is not less marked in the words of another Apostle—"Godly sorrow worketh repentance"—and therefore, however conducive to such an end, is not that end itself; and yet the distress of thousands under serious impressions, is very far from reaching to Godly sorrow.

I have seen an unprofitable grief in more than one practical form,—for the natural temper and disposition will always vary the form; and not rarely has it lead to a ruin of the spiritual interests of the soul.

A friend of mine, whose conscience the Word of God had reached, in one of its ministrations, was seized, from the first moment, with a hor-

ror of apprehension which no argument could allay. Every countenance which he saw recalled some bitter recollections; every new topic of conversation, or subject of thought, presented new causes of self reproach. His feelings were wrought up to an agony which threatened his reason; and he presented a living spectacle of the picture painted by a poet's fancy:

“ So writhes the mind remorse hath riven :
Unfit for earth, undoomed for Heaven :
Darkness above—Despair beneath,
Around it flame—within it death.”

But what was the consequence of all this?—The pity and sympathy which such a distressing case produced in the hearts of others,—and which were often most injudiciously expressed—paradoxical as it may seem, led to similar sensations in his own bosom, and in behalf of his own condition. He appeared to have separated his sad state of mind from himself; and after then viewing it as a proper object of compassion, he very naturally concluded that God did the same: and gradually assumed the hope of mercy, without—we have reason to fear,—a single just ground, or a single evidence of a truly penitent disposition.

To one who has not examined the workings

of the heart, it may appear surprising that the sufferer can so abstractedly view his sorrow as apart from himself, and literally feel a sympathy for it, as if it were the lot of another. But no one who has endured a pungency of grief for a length of time, and has taken the pains to analyze his feelings, will fail to discover this reaction. And the tenderness and softness of the feeling which then ensues, may very easily be mistaken for a change in the bent and disposition of the mind and the heart. The Inquirer—if we might still call him so—is contented with this effect. He looks away from those tests, which on a careless survey, would have proved him wanting in spiritual taste and desires.

There is another appearance of this sorrow which is still more imposing, and which is very naturally produced in certain physical constitutions that bend, like the willow, to the earth, whenever the storm of affliction is severe.—P——r was one of this description. The very first sense of his sinfulness appeared to give a meekness and gentleness to his spirit; very far from that boisterous effusion of grief, which either expends itself soon by its violence, and leaves a suspicious calm after its departure; or

else gives place to the reaction, which is equally fatal. The spirit of P——r acquired an apparent placidness, while it drooped under reflections that mortified his pride, and produced a conscious hopelessness within him. It bowed to the stroke of sorrow, as if it courted the blow, and as if a given number of the strokes were to complete the measure of his suffering. It was a fancied martyrdom, in which he anticipated the sacrifice of his passions; or a fiery ordeal in which his evil propensities were to be consumed,—and the proof of his success, to be in the patience and submission of his temper. Neither cause nor effect in all this was understood. And he looked for all that result which is to be produced by the Holy Ghost upon the heart, as an issue which is to be completed by the simple process of a depressing sorrow. And as might be expected in such a case, his only complaint was, that his grief was not sufficiently pungent: While from every source from which it was possible to derive bitter recollections, he endeavoured to collect new habiliments of mourning, and new means of mental depression. His labour was not in vain. He succeeded in forming a despondency, accompanied with all that suavi-

ty which renders it attractive, and that self-persuasion of humility which so readily follows it, without a single idea of the loathsomeness of sin, or of the nature of evangelical repentance.

But whatever be the form of this fictitious grief, it is severely reproved by the Word of God. In the message which he sent by his prophet Isaiah, he asks of those who had fallen into this mistake—"Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, &c."* And a verse which follows, beautifully describes the effect of the Divine blessing on the mind of the sincere penitent; who to a conviction of sin adds a discharge of duty, and a faithful obedience to the Will of God, while a sense of darkness has humbled and dejected his soul—"Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily; and thy righteousness shall go before thee: the glory of the Lord shall be thy reward."

* Isa. lviii. 5—7.

The error in both the preceding cases, as well as in many others, consists in attributing to nature what is the work of the Spirit alone. It was the promise of God that his Son should be “exalted to be a prince and a Saviour, to give repentance to Israel.” The gift is from on High; while the means which are used to bring it into exercise, are invariable the same. Let us examine these:

The first is, *a true conviction: or sense of guilt.* There is something in our natural constitution which renders supernatural aid indispensable, to produce such an effect. That inherent selfishness which blinds us to the truth, and leads us even to hope for the best, while it palliates and excuses the evil that is visible, can be restrained by none but a Divine power. You have seen its effects, in another shape, in cases of daily occurrence. The culprit in a civil court, whom an enlightened jury have condemned, and whom every auditor at the trial concurs in pronouncing guilty, sees a variety of causes in the manner and circumstances of the offence—in the temptation which lead to it—and in his own passions—to mitigate the crime, for which he is to pay the penalty of a violated law. His guilt indeed is proved, and

he may not be disposed to deny it. Still you can not convince him that there are not circumstances which entitle him to the consideration of mercy. And if such be his impressions, it is very certain that he has not a fair view of his own case.

Of a similar nature are the impressions of an unrenewed sinner. He may be assured of his doom; and he may agonize under a consciousness of approaching wrath; and he may believe that the woe which awaits him is the consequence of his guilt. But, still, he secretly believes that there is no proportion between the evil and its punishment. He is not persuaded that, in his own instance, "the judge of all the earth will do right" in his condemnation. Or if he openly admit the equity of his God, he fosters a latent hope, from the disparity of his guilt,—with all its supposed palliations,—and the penalty of a broken law.

Independent of this, there is, very often, a false view of the state of things between him and his God. He sees his Creator in the light—not of one pure and holy, and hating iniquity, and desiring that his creature should turn and live—but, as an inexorable judge—the severe and inflexible arbiter of his fate. All this,

accompanied as it may be with dreadful apprehensions—is a most imperfect view of the state of his soul's affairs. He forgets that the separation between the soul and its God, with all that makes up the torments of Tophet, is not simply the result of crimes that are past. It is a necessary attendant on the state of the sinner. It is not merely that God hates him as a transgressor; but he hates his God.—There is an active hostility against his Maker, which is not always brought into visible play, and which he attempts to conceal from his own sight. And it is the cherished ignorance or forgetfulness of this, which constitutes his first serious difficulty. And it is the full discovery of this which forms the climax of a state of horror, to which the mind is sometimes brought—presenting a faint, yet awful exhibition of the condition of lost spirits.

An example of all this fearfulness I will remember:

A—— received no very deep wound in his first discovery of danger. There was even a kind of pleasure attending that discovery, arising from a sanguine expectation, that pardon and mercy were at no great interval of space from his present condition. Baffled hopes led

to more serious efforts to learn more of himself. A further development of his guilt daily increased his consciousness of a nearing doom. In this his thoughts became absorbed. A continued failure augmented his distress, while it brought into action a bitterness of feeling wholly in contrast with what had appeared to be his natural character. From secret accusation of his Maker, he proceeded to more explicit reflections against the Divine Being. Even malignity was embodied in language which would shock the ears of the respecer of religion. Pride, disappointed hope, and a galling sense of utter inability to help himself, were visible together in the expressions which fell from his lips. "I see my wretchedness"—said he, on one occasion, when both manner and tone indicated the strong conflict of passions within—"and God sees it too. He who alone could help me is arrayed against me. There is no escape. No power can withstand him. Hell is before me—Would that no God existed—or that he were other than he is!"—There was something so blasphemous in all this, that one would be disposed to question the sanity of the utterer. But there was no reason for such a doubt. The example may not be common.

But no example of the complete and open acting out of a principle is common. Its operation may be comparatively silent, and still equally effective. Where true repentance is wanting, there may be a feeling of desolation in sight of sin; and a consciousness of awaiting wrath; but a right understanding of the nature of sin itself, or of its extent, can not exist. In the meanwhile, there is an aversion from our Judge—a repugnance to the plan of his dealing, often in exact proportion to our discoveries. “Where, then, is the fault?”—You would ask: “Why do not such discoveries lead to a happy issue?” I answer, because they are partial: and they must ever be so while repentance is wanting. Their imperfection arises from looking at a wrong object. The broadest survey we can take from the light of the law alone, will effect no good end.—It will only lead to a horror of mind, while it will awaken the enmity of the heart. The difference between the sinner here and in the world of despair, is, that this is the only discovery the latter can ever make in the abode of the lost; whereas the former may take such a view of sin as will lead him to repentance.

This remark brings me to the second cause,

or more properly, the true source of repentance:

In the spirit of prophecy, in which the promise of redemption was given, and that of the remission of sins, it was said—"they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn."* Here is an emphatic description of the origin, and attendant feelings, of true repentance. Until the mind is turned away from considerations merely collateral, or reflections of mere selfishness, and becomes, in some measure, fixed on the great sacrifice for sin, every feeling will continue unavailing and unacceptable to God. But let us suppose the direction of mind to be right and decided: The sinner looks to the great sacrifice for sin: He beholds the immensity of the offering, and the corresponding infinity of guilt for which it was made. He marks well the love which paid such a price for the redemption of the transgressor. His heart is penetrated with a sense of his past ingratitude. He is astonished as he traces the previous current of his affections. Every gaze deepens emotions which produce an effect upon every faculty of his mind. His understanding embraces momen-

* Zech. xii. 10.

tous truths which had been far in the back ground. In the Eastern imagery, adopted by the penitent Ephraim, he is ready to exclaim —“ Surely after that I was turned I repented; and after that I was instructed, I smote upon my thigh; I was ashamed, yea, even confounded!” In the meanwhile an insight into the purity of the Divine character puts into his mouth the exclamation of the Patriarch of old —“ I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth thee, wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.”

One other consideration stands prominently out, and flings its light upon the past and the present: It is the self accusing thought that he whom we have offended, and whose justice might have struck us down, pays the vast demand of that attribute, and bids us repose, with confidence, in the arms of his love. Here is an appeal to one of the most powerful principles of the human heart:

I will suppose you to have exercised a series of systematic efforts against the interests of an acquaintance; and that the origin of them all was in the gratification of your own selfishness, with a perfect recklessness of the issue. I will suppose that after a lapse of time, you have

discovered that this acquaintance, although aware of the inimical part you were acting, was engaged all that time in endeavouring to promote your own weal, and now, that ruin followed your deportment of evil, he stood between you and destruction. Would you not be confounded by the contrast between your own selfishness, and his disinterestedness—his love and your own malignity? And would not this be accompanied with an utter detestation of your own conduct? It is sometimes said that there is a principle within the human breast which indisposes us to love those whom we have wronged: and that in proportion to the injuries we have inflicted, we kindle an animosity in our own bosoms against their object. For the present admit this. Does not this hatred arise from a belief that a corresponding animosity exists in the bosom of the injured party?—a belief that discredits or suspects all manifestations of good-will. And is it not connected with a dread of that humiliating feeling which arises in a proud mind, on the conferment of favours by an enemy? But suppose the criminal in this case, to be fully convinced, on reflection, that all the good he received, emanated from pure disinterestedness; and

that his benefactor was prepared and able, to bury deep in oblivion all that was past—an effect not always easily conceived in human affairs—might we not look for something of a practical and affecting character in the result? Now, the sinner has been sustained by an Almighty arm, through the course of his rebellion: and yet benevolence has followed him on. If he weigh the consequences of his past life with all this in view, he may be agitated in the survey; but the sight of God out of Christ will do more than reduce him to despair. The very mercies and long suffering of which he has been the subject, will increase his hatred of his Maker, because they increase his condemnation. Change, then, the spectacle before him. Let the Saviour appear in the character in which the scriptures present him; and you can easily conceive how the enlightening of his understanding has given a new aspect to his condition and to every thing around him.

In this view of the matter before us there must be an apprehension and comprehension of the Redeemer, or of the divine mercy through him. And it is to such an end that Jesus Christ is represented as “set forth, or exhibited,” propitiation through faith in his blood.

Faith, then, in the order of its agency, precedes repentance. The latter grace is certainly highly acceptable to God; "but without faith it is impossible to please him." It is some sense, at least, of our personal concern in the great matter of salvation, which leads to repentance. Now the sole or essential difference between a false and true faith consists in the object. The careless sinner will tell us that he believes in Jesus Christ; but he has no defined idea of the object of true faith, because he has no feeling or personal interest in it. And therefore, neither this grace, nor any of its effects, can be produced in his heart.

If, then, a right comprehension of Jesus Christ is the true source of repentance, you will easily judge of the species of sorrow which accompanies it. And, in the converse of this, you will see why legal conviction of sin will be of no avail itself; while it is transitory in its nature; and while the sufferings it produces so readily end in a calm which may be mistaken for the new-birth, although it may be the incipient chilling of the second death. It is the repentance of one who does not believe.

You observe, too, that evangelical, or Godly sorrow, can not be a temporary effusion.

The waters of the smitten rock will accompany the believer through his pilgrimage. Its source is far higher than that of an earthly grief. It may not exhibit the same intensity of emotion: but the most durable grief that ever occupies the bosom is, most usually, silent. Its progress, though noiseless, is like the current of deep waters, regular and irresistible. It is, like a living stream, active and effective; not stagnant and still, diffusing the vapours of death around it.

Nor is true mourning for sin confined to the neighbourhood of its first appearance. The evangelical penitent exclaims with the Psalmist—"rivers of water run down my eyes, because, they keep not thy law."* The iniquities of others are distressing to a mind which has ever fairly and fully contemplated the Cross.

All this is the more obvious when you keep in mind the distinction that a counterfeit, or spurious repentance arises from terror; a passion whose legitimate tendency is to banish love from the bosom, or rather to interdict its entrance there. Previous to the existence of this legal conviction, the sinner may have en-

* Ps. cxix. 136.

tertained an idea of his God rather pleasant than otherwise. But it arose from that conception of the Divine mercy which rather encouraged than depressed his feelings of self-complacency: this being removed, and a more full notion of justice coming into sight, an external obedience commences from a principle of dread. It is the same restraint which is kept on the conduct of the wolf by the nearness of the shepherd. It is the same obedience which a refractory slave may observe, under fear of the lash of his master. Remove the apprehension of personal punishment, and the dominion of lust will be more powerful than ever. It will be found that the momentary check gives strength to desire, and passion unrestricted flows beyond its former bounds. And it is hence we often find the profligacy of those once awakened more inveterate and determined than it had been before. The sorrow had been, rather that God hated sin so much, than that they had been guilty of it.

On the contrary, true repentance springs from love to God, and a corresponding hatred of all that is unlike his holy character. To such a man it is not a subject of sorrow that the law is so holy, and its penalty so severe. He laments

that his nature has been in opposition to the sacred requirements, and that his inherent carnality is so much at variance with his spiritual desires.

In the first case, aversion was created by the very effort to obey, and the distance between God and himself was accordingly widened. In the second, obedience is a means of keeping the affections nearer their object.

Spurious repentance produces an imperfect effect upon the life. This is obvious from its very nature. As it does not arise from a just discovery of the evil of sin, and is not connected with an abhorrence of it, any change which may be produced is partial. It is true the subject may make certain sacrifices, in the omission of certain practices, or in the discharge of certain duties: But without jealousy of self, which arises from an insight into his own heart:—without that law of love, which turns inclination to obedience, and puts the safest construction on the Divine commands—it is impossible that the reformation of life should be complete. If such a man do not content himself with obedience to certain requirements which demand little self-denial, and consider this sufficient to cover his neglect

of those which call for a greater sacrifice:— or if he do not play some other and equally compromising part; if he do not commit certain evils, he will omit certain duties: if he be restrained from open transgression, he will cherish iniquities of the heart. The actings of his mind do not come under his careful inspection. There is a light rein to the workings of a depraved fancy. There is no critical scrutiny of his motives. There is no inquiry into the tenour of his desires. The want of substantial principle excludes all possibility of regular and permanent benefit.—Even the external appearance of good may be temporary, irregular and fitful. Now it is the opposite of all this which takes place in a mind renewed unto repentance in God.

In the first of these cases there is no ground of humility, because here is no self-loathing,— no distressing sensation of the power of indwelling depravity. And the failure, therefore, of an attempt to remove any evil is not a matter of great uneasiness: because, while it can be attributed to natural infirmity, he is satisfied in casting all the blame there, and acquires a feeling of self complacency in the act of doing so. To him there is here no additional reason for hating the dominion of sin.

The true penitent, on the contrary, exclaims with the Apostle on every such discovery—“Oh wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” while he sinks into the dust of self abasement; and wonders at the extent of that grace which could pardon guilt of so deep a die. His faith, and repentance, and this knowledge of himself, constitute the true foundation of humility. Charity for the faults of others, and a love for those who bear the image of God, are inseparable accompaniments. So true is it, that where one genuine grace exists, the rest of the train will likewise be.

I need not trespass further on your time by describing the *fruits* of repentance, as they are commonly called in the life of the penitent. The Apostle Paul seems to have summed up all these in a short sentence addressed to the Church of Corinth: “For behold this self same thing that ye sorrowed after a Godly sort, what carefulness is wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge!”*

You see, then, that he who inquires into the

* 2 Cor. vii. 11.

meaning and character of true repentance, is looking for the evidence of a change of heart, and not for that which he is to find previous to his approach to God.

Adieu, Dear Sir, may it be yours to “look unto Him,” who in dying for our transgressions made more manifest our guilt, while he displayed the fullness of his mercy.

Very truly yours.



LETTER XIII.

An Inquirer reviewing his past cares—A remarkable period in his life—The simplicity of faith—A temptation to hold back from Christ—Natural incredulousness—The afflicted Father’s application to Christ—The case applied to the Inquirer—The workings of the Inquirer’s mind—His surrender to Christ—The change—Difference in different cases—The act in which relief most commonly arrives—Not always the same—Valedictory.

MY DEAR SIR,

To him who entertains a hope that he has found the great object of his search, a review of his past solicitude, and of the fluctuations of his doubts and fears—comprising, as they do, a painful history—will end in astonishment at his own perverseness. This may not be equally the case with all. But there will be few

who will not discover that much of their time has been expended in the removal of misconceptions—in correcting errors—in looking for some new rules—in attempting to pry into the secret purposes of God—or to complete the work of the Saviour—in vain fancies of the future, or endeavouring to cultivate patience to wait for the gift of faith. A retrospect of past life, in its ordinary details, presents a melancholy group of circumstances to most of us. But a review of the season of conviction of sin, and the application for mercy, brings before us a crowd of distressing images. We are astonished at an infatuation so visible in our present state of mind, and at our great ignorance of things which now appear so perfectly plain. But, above all, we wonder at our rejection of knowledge, or our misapplication of it; and at our obstinate efforts to render intricate and complex, what was distinguished by its simplicity. It is now, for the first time, we understand the spirit of the Syrian general's reply to the prophet—"Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?" And the force of his servant's answer, "My father, if the Prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou

not have done it? how much rather then, when he saith to thee, wash and be clean?"

But there may be a period in our history, reached before this, when we are able to look back, and retrace the relinquishment—the reluctant relinquishment of one point after another, and find ourselves wholly unable to distinguish a single remaining impediment visible near us: and yet still nothing of a distinctive character on which to rest a wearied and disconsolate mind: the past a painful survey: the future blank——

“Poor child of doubt and death, whose hope was built on reeds!”

A state such as this, seems something like a pause in the moral career of the subject. There is an eventful silence, in which the exhausted passions seek a respite from their toil, and the flagging spirits, wearied by their excitement, sink into the languor of despondency. Or, if no such marked effect succeed the restlessness and chafing of the Inquirer, after he has at last seen all hindrances to his salvation resolved into his own fault, and his artificial resources from pain removed—there is most usually still a momentary calm broken by a voice that announces a partial possession of the very boon

that is sought—"I *would* believe!" Faith, that wonderful and mysterious principle, relative to which so many surmises had existed, and which had appeared so indefinable, begins, perhaps insensibly, its operations in the soul. The Inquirer ascertains that the difficulty of explaining the meaning of the term consisted in its very simplicity. And he may be astonished in finding himself in the partial exercise of a grace, relative to the distinctions of which he had so much perplexed his mind. And he easily sees how it is, that many who are illiterate and ignorant, and who have not lingered on the way in pursuit of meanings and distinctions, more readily lay hold of the hope of salvation than some whose knowledge is greater, and whose understandings have been better enlightened. He sees, on the one hand, the hopelessness of his condition, as it is by nature; and, on the other, the suitableness of the Divine promises to all the circumstances of his case. It is a comparison, such as this, which fits his mind for the exercise of belief. The particular character of his present state assists him in interpreting the Gospel plan, while he beholds its adaptation to his own wants; and an examination into this plan, again,—briefly and

imperfectly as it may be done—corrects and illustrates his conceptions of his own condition. He may be hardly sensible of the process of such a comparison; nor perhaps is he often so. Nor would it probably occur to him that the degree of his faith will be according to the extent of the truth which becomes visible to him; or that faith itself may not always correspond with the evidence of the truth, but will depend on the manner in which that truth affects the mind. He has neither disposition nor power, in a crisis which has enlisted into action every feeling of his heart, as well as every faculty of his mind, to watch a process by which the Holy Spirit commences a work of grace within him. It is enough that the wretchedness of his natural state is itself complete, and that the tenders of the Lord Jesus Christ are exactly suited to the exigencies of his own soul.

It is this survey which gives him confidence to cast the whole weight of his spirit on the Redeemer, and to say, with the Christian poet——

“A guilty, weak, and helpless worm
On thy kind arms I fall;
Be *thou* my strength and righteousness,
My Jesus, and my all.”

It is indeed true that the Inquirer may be

tempted to hold back from a full confidence in Christ,—a consequence of some idea of the glory of the object sought, contrasted with his own unworthiness. And another case, much resembling this, is not uncommon. The awakened sinner who has seen the ordinary obstructions to his faith vanishing one by one, and who has a partial glimpse of the excellency of Divine grace, may be induced to retreat from it, by that infidelity which is natural to some minds, on the first receipt of happy intelligence. I have somewhere said that you must have witnessed a diversity of effects from the same intelligence on different dispositions. One may drink in the information with eagerness and implicit credulity: another will avow his doubts at once, for no other reason than that it is “too good news to be true.” And thus may it be with the Inquirer in the present case. He can not believe; not because his sins are too great to be pardoned; for he may not doubt the sufficiency of the atonement; and he may see that honour would accrue to the Redeemer, from the recovery of the vilest sinner. But he can not lay hold of a truth, whose personal application to himself is to produce so amazing an alteration in his

present and eternal condition. And indeed the same feeling may sometimes, and to some extent exist in the mind of the Christian himself. There may be a time, when his views of the glory of the redeemed, and of the value of redemption may, so far overwhelm him with a sense of their grandeur and excellence, as to institute a doubt whether he *can* be a partaker. The happy fate of others he does not question; but his own he does not admit.

The fault here consists in an imperfect view of the subject. He distinguishes one part of it, while another is hardly visible. The provisions of the Gospel are discerned; but their exact fitness to his own case is overlooked. The possibility of mercy is acknowledged; but its appropriateness to a state obviously his own, is not recollected. Here, and in any other instance in which a part of the character or design of redemption is forgotten, there is a strong temptation to incredulousness. When the Inquirer then, is sometimes induced to stand aloof from the offer of grace, and to exclaim—"the gift seems too great for me—I can not believe that so much favour can be mine," his comprehension of the subject on which he is occupied is imperfect.

Or, there may be another reason for such an expression. There may be a self deception of which he is not aware. He may be nurturing a false humility which he secretly deems acceptable, if not pleasing, to God: and for which he looks for a proportionate reward. He forgets that it is dishonourable to his Maker to discredit the offers on which the Divine veracity is staked; and that, while he considers his diffidence a virtue, it is challenging the truth of Jehovah.

Where there was more real candour to itself, I have sometimes watched the workings of a mind, whose changes were almost distinctly visible, and which after all its false reasonings, had seen the necessity and duty of an immediate and implicit reliance on Jesus Christ. And I have thought how strong a resemblance there was between such a case, and that of the petitioner who said—"I believe, help my unbelief."* You remember the story well. The afflicted man had said—"if thou canst do any thing:" The Saviour replies, "if thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth:" in other words, the hindrance consisted in the weakness of faith on the part of the

* Mark, ix. 23, 24.

applicant, and not in the difficulty in the case itself. A distinction of which we are too apt to lose sight. The anxious parent receives the reproof, and acknowledges its justice; while, at the same time he lays hold of the encouragement which the language of the Saviour was designed to convey, and exclaims in the words we have quoted. Here was still an obvious imperfection on the part of the applicant. He admitted that Christ was the Son of God; and while he considered him the last hope, the inveteracy of his child's disease staggered any confidence he would have reposed in his miraculous power. Of this imperfection he seems to have been sensible. And with the emotion of a bosom, the seat of a struggle between hope and fear, he asks assistance to his wavering mind: and asks it with tears. The very act of his prayer evinced some confidence in the Son of God, while it displayed a sense of temptation to distrust. Acceptable prayer implies some degree of faith, even though the subject of that prayer be faith itself. And in this instance, the applicant indicates his belief in the power and sufficiency of Christ, while he asks for assistance to his unbelief. And he did what

the disciples had done before him, when they said—"Lord, increase our faith!"

It is thus the awakened sinner, in sight of his lost condition, in view of the sufficiency of Jesus Christ, and of his own natural infidelity, cries, "help my unbelief!" It is the cry of a burdened soul, attempting to rest the weight of his cares on the Saviour,—seeking assistance to do so—and complaining of the hardness of a heart which weakens his confidence. The light which pours into his mind in this effort, discovers more fully the depravity he laments, while it reveals to a greater extent, the inducements to an unconditional surrender of his whole affections. There is, probably, not a single prayer adopted by successful Inquirers more general than this: Nor one, if this arise from the heart, more frequently the immediate precursor of a sensible change. I have often thought the whole story itself one of the most applicable to the present subject.

If I were to attempt to describe the workings of the Inquirer's mind, when near to this happy issue, I should certainly derive that description from the discoveries he makes of the Redeemer's character. He sees God, as manifested in his Son—justice, as satisfied by his

death—mercy, as revealed through him. He reflects on the World, to form the best estimate of it, by contemplating Him who knew not where to lay his head: On death, to behold in Christ the resurrection and the life: On the judgment, to see the victim of Calvary the occupant of the throne. Nor is there any thing connected with the Divine plan of government; nor any thing with which the Christian has to do in the concerns of eternity, where the person and character of Jesus Christ do not hold the prominent place. All—every thing, is resolved into matters belonging to the offices of the gracious Redeemer. And how effectually such meditations become the means of fastening the attention on the Mediator and Advocate of sinners; and of imparting, although perhaps insensibly, a lively faith in his name. How difficulties vanish in such an engagement, and how freely the sinner exclaims in the first act of belief,

“Jesus, I give myself away,
’Tis all that I can do!”

Happy moment! when a sense of ill-desert,
of confidence in Christ, and grateful love, meet
and blend together!

B b

I am not sure that the particular manner, or feelings, with which the Inquirer first lays hold of the hope of salvation, differing as they do, in different persons, deserve much of your consideration: And yet it may not be amiss to say a few words on this subject.

In some minds, there is a rapid, or even a sudden, transition, from a painful state of moral darkness, to a condition of light and comfort. During the act of prayer, or in some moment of meditation, the oppressive weight which had rested on the heart of the Inquirer, leaves him. His views of sovereign mercy are distinct and clear. A spirit of humble confidence takes possession of his bosom. His feelings consciously draw him to the contemplation of the riches of grace. Hope flings its bright rays around him. Every thing appears changed. Every thing is new. A smile of heavenly cheerfulness plays on the very works of nature. A reconciled God shines in them all. And the gloom, which had so recently lowered over every object that met the eye, has passed away, like the morning cloud. The Inquirer is astonished at himself; astonished at a transition so utterly unaccountable, and unexpected. Whence this wonderful alteration

in external things? The change is in his own mind, and not in them. Whence that disposition to a full confidence in his Saviour, so different from his late waverings and fears? He can not himself comprehend it; nor can he retrace a single step to it. He can only say, like one restored of old, "whereas I was blind, now I see!"

Oh, how different is all this from his former fanciful expectations! How unlike all that imagination had figured! And how may it remind him of that memorable prophecy of a Saviour's power—"I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not; I will lead them in paths that they have not known! I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight."*

Wonderful, transforming influence! Mysterious and silent agency! And the subject of this astonishing change half questions a reality which his sober judgment on every appeal, confirms. He inquires of his own heart—"Is it that I have lost sight of my sinfulness—and that my forgetfulness of guilt has produced this peace from the contrast with its painful remembrance? No: Guilt never assumed a

* Is. xlii. 16.

form so horrible before: sin was never so loathsome, and purity never so lovely. I look back, to see the narrow plank over which I have passed, and I shudder at the yawning abyss below it. The moral atmosphere I breathe gives vigour to my exhausted spirit. My desires expand—My appetite craves a new sustenance for the soul.——Tell me, is not this of God?

Memorable epoch! memorable through eternity. It is the commencement of life: all before it was the spectacle of putrefaction and death.

But the moment, the hour, or the day, is far less marked in the experience of others. A more common case, perhaps, is that in which the light breaks on the understanding, like the gradual approach of the morning dawn: It was the prayer of the prostrate soul——

“Come, then, thou Crucified, my mourning thoughts
Oh sanctify! reveal thy bleeding form
To me, miserable. Oh impart
Thy mercy, while I seek—
Thy presence. Lo, I come all penitent,
Bowing to earth oppressed.”——

And the petition flows with an earnestness and fervour hitherto unknown. No divine

influence is imagined. And yet the petitioner is surprised at a new intensity of feeling; a freedom of utterance; a sweet and lovely calm, well marked in opposition to the experience of hours gone by. And yet still the mist is not completely scattered. The sensible alteration that exists is not sufficient to create a holy joy. Assurance is wanting. Desire is more importunate. And, in the sense of partial discovery, the Inquirer exclaims, like the blind man of Bethsaida, "I see men, as trees, walking."* And it may be that another—or even another accession of light, is necessary to unfold, clearly, the object of a holy confidence: the march of the understanding and affections regular and steady onwards: and the progressive effects which succeed each other, give, in turn, additional reasons, for a complete trust in the promise of salvation. Reflections and comparison confirm that trust. And the recovered soul advances, with certain pace, to the enjoyment of heavenly peace.

But "he went his way rejoicing," is not to be told of all. There are those who, from reasons already assigned, never participate in the more elevated enjoyments which belong

* Mark, viii. 24.

to the experience of others. A physical constitution naturally cold, or defective views, in some few particulars, may keep the mind in a degree of suspense, even through the remainder of life. But still the subject of our remarks, discovers a change within himself which is obviously from on high. The charms of the world have faded away:—Their insufficiency and vanity are conspicuous to his sight. Sin assumes a greater and greater disgust of aspect. The value of the soul, and the mercies of Christ, are more distinctly discerned. And if there be no ardour in his devotions, it is not because his heart is elsewhere, for these furnish his dearest hours. If he can not “tune the enraptured lay;” and soar with a lighter and a freer spirit, there is a regularity in the movements of the soul. If the language of some of the songs of Zion is sometimes too high strung for the measure of his feelings, those feelings accord with its spirit still. He loves to contemplate what the redeemed admire, while he laments the oppressive weight that restrains his flight. The world shall behold him the consistent Christian. And his pursuits, in their seriousness and steadiness, shall tell the direction of his

prevailing taste and desires. He recognizes a sustaining hand, that upholds him in his ways; but his faith furnishes no cup of positive delight.

Or there may be other gradations of feeling, somewhat different from either of these, arising from the character of the mind, the circumstances under which it acts, or the manner of the Divine influence. Yet all these variations are of secondary importance. It is enough that the heart is transferred from the world to God: that its affections have a new home. The degree of spiritual enjoyment is not the primary test of a renewed soul: And the measurement of its increase is not always a profitable employment.

Nor can the act by which consolation first comes to the mind be always distinguished as the same. Some passage of Scripture is frequently rendered the instrument of dispersing the surrounding gloom, and opening an avenue to hope. And yet that passage may have come unsought, and at a time when the thoughts had taken a different direction. Or, when despair has completely overwhelmed the soul, an unexpected relief may reach the sufferer without

distinguishable means, at the very moment in which a sense of his helplessness is most distressing.

I am confident that most Christians who can recur to the first day of relief—for all are by no means able to do so—date their change in the act of prayer, or in that of pondering the Divine Word. But the great Re-creator of hearts makes use of instruments which seemed to have no connexion with so important an end. An exemplary Christian, “whose praise is in all the churches,” owed his first sense of a change to an ordinary incident of life: His child was engaged in reading aloud a portion of Grecian history. The father had been absorbed in a melancholy review of his past life; and in a kind of vacant gaze on the dreariness of the present prospect; when his attention was awakened by the following anecdote:

Alexander the Great had promised a courtier, who had rendered him some signal service, whatever reward he might ask. On the credit of this promise, the favourite drew an exorbitant order on the royal treasury. The Treasurer, astonished, took the order to his master. Alexander looked at it for a moment,

and then said to the officer——“ This proves how generously my friend thinks of my love: He proportions his demand to his trust in my affection. Pay the amount.”——The train of reflections which succeeded in the mind of the Parent, began a new era in his life. “ Have I”——thought he,——“ been soliciting the friend of sinners, with a cherished doubt of his willingness to do all that he offers? Have I intimated a discredit of *his* truth, who gave his life a ransom for the miserable? I *will* believe. And his own goodness shall interpret my confidence.” There may seem little connexion between the story and the results to which it led. But it is impossible to tell the associations to which any incident may carry us: or to augur those unaccountable evolutions of thought to which we are all accustomed. And we know how readily the mind brings, and appropriates to its favourite pursuit, all that passes before it.

And now, Dear Sir, farewell! I take leave of this subject, after placing these hints in your hands, with an humble hope that the Great Hearer of prayer may sanctify my feeble efforts to relieve your anxiety: And with some

confidence in commending you to Him who can say to your own soul, with the same power with which he spake in the beginning of creation,——“LET THERE BE LIGHT!”

Very truly Yours.

NEW WORKS,

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Extract from the Preface.

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In alluding to these suppressed letters, the late highly esteemed Leigh Richmond once emphatically remarked—"Cowper's character will never be clearly and satisfactorily understood without them, and should be permitted to exist for the demonstration of the case. I know the importance of it from numerous conversations I have had, both in England and Scotland, on this subject. Persons of truly religious principles, as well as those of little or no religion at all, have greatly erred in their estimate of this great and good man."

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The following is from the Spectator, of April 20, 1833.

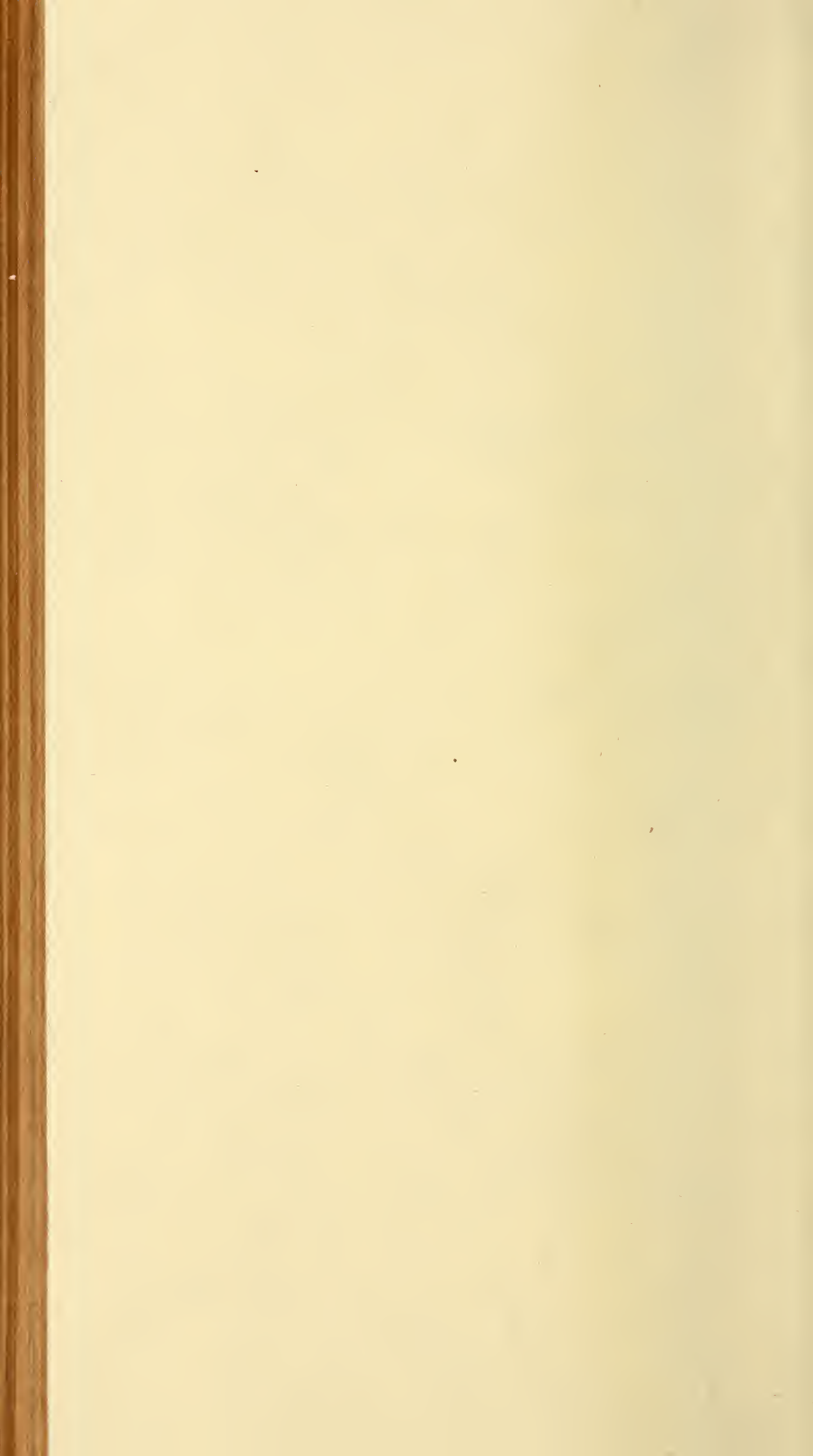
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